

COSMOPOLITAN

A full-page photograph of Olivia Rodrigo. She has long, dark, wavy hair and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. She is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved, open-front cardigan over a dark, low-cut top. Her hands are crossed in front of her chest, and she is wearing a ring on her left ring finger. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

Summer Fling

Eyeshadow
Is Back!
Hair Is Long
Again!

18

Plot Twists

The Juiciest
Beach
Reads Ever

Confessions

"How Shirtless
Trans Guys
on TikTok
Changed
My Life"

THE
BEAUTY
ISSUE



Young Miko

Olivia Dean

Rob Rausch

Alix Earle

Paloma Sandoval

Veronika
Slowikowska

REI AMI, EJAE & Audrey Nuna

Audrey Hobert

Vivian Wilson

Jessica Knoll

Ayra Starr

Sienna Spiro

Adéla

Freya Skye

KATSEYE

& More

Olivia Rodrigo

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this world and my skin
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★★★★★

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A woman with long dark hair is standing on a grassy hill. She is wearing a pink lace crop top with thin straps and a black skirt. Her hair is blowing in the wind. The background shows rolling green hills under a clear blue sky. In the upper right corner, there is a quote in white cursive text.

*"Now I can
have fun
again."*

A black and white close-up photograph of a woman laughing joyfully, her head tilted back and eyes closed. Her dark, wavy hair is blowing in the wind. She is wearing a black choker necklace with a small heart-shaped pendant and a gold-colored hoop earring. The background is a plain, light gray.

BE

LOVE



PANDÖRA

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Take the Plunge

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Great Lengths

Model Vivian Wilson's hair is super long and yours should be, too.

Cover photographed by
MORGAN MAHER

Cover styled by
BRANDON TAN

Cover: Dress **Tom Ford**,
ring **Chanel Fine Jewelry**.

Inside cover: All clothing
Chloé.

Hair by Rena Calhoun for
Sisley Paris. Makeup by
Melissa Hernandez for
Lancôme. Manicure by
Yoko Sakakura for OPI. Set
design by Colin Phelan.
Produced by Alexey
Galetskiy Productions.
Shot on location at Sable
Movie Ranch, provided by
Métier Maison.

This page: Dress and earrings
Chloé, skirt stylist's own.



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Editor's Letter

DEAR READERS,

Throughout the making of The Beauty Issue, I kept coming back to why Olivia Rodrigo was the obvious—and only—cover star choice. Beauty is never just physical beauty. It is how we show up, how we cope, how we tell the world who we are.

I've long applauded how seamlessly Olivia's artistry and convictions intersect. She is a fierce advocate for reproductive rights and has consistently spoken out about the urgent stakes young women are facing right now, a commitment that earned her Planned Parenthood's Catalyst of Change Award last year. I was lucky enough to be in the room as Olivia accepted the honor and spoke eloquently about her activism.

The conversation we had then, and the subsequent interview on page 60, also revealed a new lightness to Olivia. Everyone who has followed the singer since her breakout song "drivers license" knows the bracingly honest version of her (both her *SOUR* and *GUTS* albums have gotten me through more heartbreak and more growing pains than I care to admit). But this new era feels like something else. She is secure. She is happy. She still borrows from the confessional tradition—the rawness of Sylvia Plath, the self-awareness of Nora Ephron (a former *Cosmopolitan* writer)—and wraps it in melodies so addictive, you forget other pop music exists. It's just that now, for the first time, she's writing from the other side of all the angst and bringing us along.

Speaking of coming together, this is the first time all editions of *Cosmopolitan* around the world have collaborated on a single cover story, creating a true global moment. In the U.S., this issue also includes stories where voices like Alix Earle, Rob Rausch, and Young Miko weigh in on beauty, love, and intimacy. We also dive into how smoking weed influences your skincare (page 46), publish complex meditations on gender and identity (page 100), and dig into how AI has changed sexting (page 24).

Genuinely, this might be one of my favorite issues to date. After the winter and spring we've had, I hope you are doing okay and you're as excited as I am for summer. ■

LOVE,

Willie

WILLA BENNETT
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF
COSMOPOLITAN & *SEVENTEEN*

P.S. Donate directly to
Olivia's Fund 4 Good here:



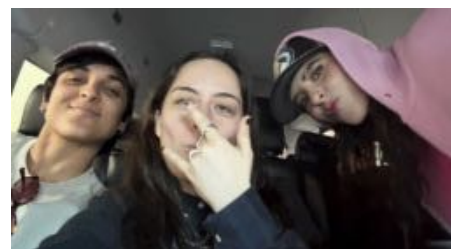
Before her *Cosmopolitan* cover shoot, Olivia and I worked on this vision board together. It made me love her music and creative process even more. See what I mean at [Cosmopolitan.com/olivia-rodrigo-2026](https://cosmopolitan.com/olivia-rodrigo-2026).



I'm so proud of Cosmo Sports cover star Alysia Liu for winning gold at the 2026 Winter Olympics. *Cosmo* girls can truly do anything. Catch her story at [Cosmopolitan.com/alysia-liu](https://cosmopolitan.com/alysia-liu).

Morgan Maher, who photographed Olivia Rodrigo for this issue, took this photo of me in 2021. We lived next door to each other in NYC's West Village and used to dream about making art for magazines one day.

A selfie of me surrounded by Young Miko (right) and her manager, Mari (left). Read all about our weekend in Puerto Rico on page 76.



BOARD: COURTESY OF WILLA BENNETT, LIU, ELINOR KRY, MARI, BENNETT, AND YOUNG MIKO; COURTESY OF WILLA BENNETT, BENNETT, MORGAN MAHER.

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It's Veronika Slowikowska!

One of *Saturday Night Live*'s newest featured players brings the same delightfully unhinged energy to everything she touches, including her iconic *SNL* characters (one of the many ladies in love with Domingo, a Gen Alpha boy with a sweet tooth for Airheads on the *Snack Homiez* podcast, a singing washer-dryer duo with Sabrina Carpenter) and our legendary Cosmo Quiz. When she's not lighting up 30 Rockefeller Plaza, you can catch her as Kelly on Netflix's workplace comedy *Tires*.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT

Styled by BILLIE ROSE OWEN

Written by MAXWELL LOSGAR

Nickname:

V, Ika (ee-k-ah), Ronnie

Hometown:

Ontario, Canada

Sun/Moon/Rising signs:

Sun: scorpio Moon: capricorn rising: aquarius

Relationship status:

taken ♡ I think

My life right now is...

crazy,
amazing,
hard,
beautiful,
funny

Album I'd take with me
to a desert island:

Sd-2
Loukeman

An artist on all my
playlists:

T-Pain

I smell like:

Neroli & Basil
by Salt and Stone

Food I order after a night out:

chicken fingers
and pancakes

Best advice I've ever received:

To wash some clothes in cold water,
especially the ones that say to.



Last person I texted:

To Kyle "Thank you!!! Love
you so much! Thank you!!!"

Movie I watch over and over:

Springbreakers or
Worst Person in the World

Last TV show I binged:

TLC's Sister Wives

If I worked at Cosmo, my job would be...

human desk

App that takes up most of my screen time:

instagram

Last time I cried:

Walking around Tokyo listening to
um um by Sega Bodega by myself

Always in my bag:

my wallet

Never have I ever:

killed someone

SNL alum I'd love to
star in a movie with:

Norm Macdonald

Dream dinner party guests:

Addison Rae
Jeff Probst
GEICO Gecko

Most strongly held yet unpopular opinion:

I shouldn't need to download
an app to turn on a light.
or anything for that matter.
No more apps to turn things on.



Please enjoy Veronika at
her SNL funniest.

Top **Tory Burch**, bodysuit **Briah Artemis**, tights **Lechery**,
shoes **Manolo Blahnik**, earrings (worn throughout)
Nicole Rose, bracelet **Nickho Rey**. Opposite page: Shirt
Angelica Montini, bra **Araks**, tiara from **Artifact NY**.

Hair by Nyla Nasser. Makeup by Chloe Grae.

Tide and True

Splashproof splurges for a wet summer.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT

Written by JESSICA NEISES



Warm weather calls for pieces that can keep you cool *and* handle a little spontaneity. Start with a hero item like this Loewe translucent PVC slip-on heel, sculptural and polished yet built to survive the shore. Choose a candy-colored swimsuit or streamlined rash guard (or both) for wave duty, and throw on wraparound shades to block UV rays, waterproof mascara that can survive a swim, and a water-resistant watch to track every lap. This lineup will have you ready to dive into every moment of wet hair, sun-kissed skin, and sand between your toes.

Shoes **Loewe**, \$1,100, loewe.com.

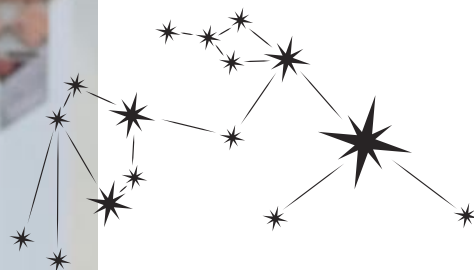


01. Bag **Dries Van Noten**, \$1165, driesvannoten.com. 02. Swimsuit **Lido**, \$235, lido-lido.com. 03. Water bottle **Frank Green**, \$53, us.frankgreen.com. 04. Sunglasses **Gentle Monster**, \$335, gentlemonster.com. 05. Extensionist waterproof mascara **L'Oréal Paris**, \$16, ulta.com. 06. Swimsuit **Amir Slama**, \$280, farfetch.com. 07. Cooler **Coming Soon**, \$145 each, comingsoonnewyork.com. 08. Speaker **Bose**, \$269, bose.com. 09. Wetsuit **Abyesse**, \$350, abyseofficial.com. 10. Top **Rusty**, \$40, rusty.com. 11. Lapis body oil **Herbivore Botanicals**, \$58, herbivorebotanicals.com. 12. Bikini **Fruity Booty**, \$133, fruitybooty.co.uk. 13. Touch Blush **Prada Beauty**, \$42, sephora.com. 14. Apple Watch Series 11 **Apple**, \$399, apple.com. 15. Flip-flops **Rabanne**, \$495, rabanne.com. 16. Shorts **Made Some Sportswear**, \$225, madesome.world. 17. Sandals **Gap**, \$40, gap.com. 18. Earrings **Julietta**, \$275, shopjulietta.com. 19. Pouch **Dezso**, \$45, dezsosara.com. 20. Bikini **Oséree**, \$334, oseree.com. 21. Sunglasses **Miu Miu**, \$440, miumiu.com.

The Universe Has Decided

In every issue, we rank celebrity couples by the only critic that matters: the cosmos.

By ANNABEL IWEGBUE



KAIA GERBER AND LEWIS PULLMAN

VIRGO ♥ AQUARIUS

The connection between the couple's Moon and Mars placements—the things that determine inner emotions and instinct, passion, and sexuality, respectively—is especially strong. When a pair shares these in the same element (theirs are both in water signs), it can signal instant physical chemistry and a sweet protector-protectee dynamic. And in this particular case, it's reciprocal: Kaia and Lewis take turns being each other's armor and advocate.

His Venus in Pisces also aligns with her Moon in Pisces, meaning he naturally energizes and affirms her dreamy, creative side. Taking this incredibly Piscean relationship even further is Lewis's Venus sign, which dictates how he expresses affection, in Kaia's 4th house of home and family in Pisces. It's a placement beneficial to any duo looking to build a life together. If Kaia and Lewis want to eventually explore the proverbial white picket fence family life, they've got the planets on their side.

GETTY IMAGES



ROBBY HOFFMAN AND GABBY WINDEY

SAGITTARIUS ♥ CAPRICORN

This is the funniest couple at any party thanks to their shared Mercury (the planet of intellect and communication) in bold, honest Sagittarius. The placement means that Robby and Gabby can find humor in almost any situation and that together, they're full of endless laughs.

But while they're always down for a good time, their charts also signal that they've been able to be vulnerable with each other from the start. Gabby's Capricorn Sun connects with Robby's Moon and Venus, pointing to mutual emotional understanding and long-term stability. Sprinkle in some Sun-Moon synastry (Robby's Sun and Gabby's Moon are both in fire signs) and you've got a duo who can easily keep up with each other's high energy.

RIHANNA AND A\$AP ROCKY

PISCES ♥ LIBRA

Fiery Aries energy dominates Rihanna's birth chart, evident in her quick wit (see: her iconic old Twitter posts) and relentless drive (see: her many business ventures). And while she's a Pisces Sun, it's that Aries spirit that's truly understood and motivated by A\$AP Rocky's placements.

His Venus (the planet of love) in Leo and Mars (the planet of passion) in Aries create a powerful, mutually invigorating dynamic between the pair. Coupled with lighthearted Mercury placements in air signs and A\$AP's Venus falling in Rihanna's 5th house of creativity and children, you get a duo who expand each other's imagination and personal style—and view each other as ideal parents (see: the adorable brood they've welcomed over the years).



ODESSA A'ZION AND DREW STARKEY

GEMINI ♥ SCORPIO

There's a widely held assumption that intense Scorpios and stereotypically flighty Geminis can't click, but compatible chart placements can challenge that narrative. In Odessa and Drew's case, their shared Mars in water signs adds emotional depth and passion to their relationship.

At the same time, they both have Venus in air signs, suggesting they value their own space. They know how to let each other breathe—and be flirtatious and free-spirited—without succumbing to jealousy or insecurity. They also have their planet of communication, Mercury, in compatible water signs (Drew's in Scorpio, Odessa's in Cancer), meaning they have similar thought processes and don't feel the need to censor themselves.



★★★★★

Role-Play!

What the universe has to say about your favorite fictional couples (according to our creative calculations).



JULES AND RUE

Euphoria

Rue is canonically a Virgo, and she showcases the sign's shy and overly self-critical tendencies. Being paired with her opposite—a dreamy, sensitive Pisces, like Jules seems to be—sounds like it could be disastrous. But while one partner's decision-making may often feel irrational to the other in opposite sign relationships, as these two prove, those same differences can also help both people find emotional growth.



PENELOPE AND ODYSSEUS

The Odyssey

Penelope is famously loyal and patient (if you recall, she waited 20 years for Odysseus to return home), which exemplifies strong Taurus energy. Her determined earth sign qualities pair well with the brave, disciplined Capricorn traits Odysseus displays. There may also be a Saturnian element at play: Strong Saturn aspects often indicate both delayed gratification and relationships that withstand the test of time.

Ask @WillaHBennett

Cosmopolitan editor-in-chief Willa Bennett answers all your questions about love, relationships, and identity.

Should it bother me that my boyfriend's "ex" is a conventionally beautiful AI bot?

Cosmopolitan editors have been all over the ways AI has completely



changed—and complicated—the dating landscape. Personally, I haven't been with someone who's dated an

AI bot yet, but I can understand why it could feel unsettling. What would make me pause in this case is not the bot itself but what that relationship provided. Was it a placeholder for intimacy? A way to yearn for the unattainable? A way to avoid vulnerability with real people? Or just a moment to experiment? Regardless, like always, your feelings are valid. The real question here is whether you feel secure and happy in the present and comfortable enough to be able

to talk to your boyfriend about said feelings. Ruminating on that might end up being more revealing than anything you'd actually find out about the AI ex.

My most recent relationship ended really abruptly. Should I reach out to figure out why?

Ask yourself what you're hoping to gain from making contact. Sometimes reaching out can reopen a wound that has started to close. And closure is rarely delivered by the person who hurt you. More often, it's something you build yourself. If you can accept that you may not get the response you want, then it's okay to reach out. But if you're secretly hoping this conversation will rewrite the relationship's ending, I'd pause. Chances are, you'll only end up more frustrated. There's a reason I do not speak to any of my exes. I'm

a firm believer that going no-contact is the best way to move on.

My partner loves when I don't wear makeup, but I feel the hottest with a full face on. Whose desire am I better off prioritizing?

Yours. I have dated people who preferred it when I dressed more feminine. But that isn't me. I feel my best in sharp tailoring and suiting. When I lean into that, I walk differently. I move with more confidence. That energy is what people respond to. If heavy eyeshadow, a bold lip, or lots of blush makes you feel magnetic, that feeling is the point (you can take my word for it and also one of our beauty editor's—she's experienced this in real life, too). A partner can



have an opinion, but it should never override your self-expression.

I am more open to experimenting sexually when I feel good about the way I look. How closely are beauty and desire linked?

Very closely! Beauty and desire speak the same language. Both ask you to be fully present in your body. When you feel confident and present, you give desire more room to grow. It's hard to be adventurous when you're busy self-editing.

How do I support my partner through their gender transition without centering my own fear of change?

You're always allowed to have feelings, but I'd try to keep those separate from your partner's needs right now. Whenever I have supported someone through big identity shifts, I've found it helpful to process my fears somewhere else first—with a friend, a therapist, or a journal. That's allowed me to show up for a partner with curiosity and keep the focus on who they were becoming, not on what I was afraid of losing.

My friends think it's weird that I've started picking up my boyfriend's style. What do you think?

People who are close influence each other, even subconsciously. If you're

What are some actually good songs about sex?

Rapper Young Miko is able to capture the nuances of sex and sexuality like no one else. Check out her *Cosmopolitan* profile on page 76, then stream some of her songs. It's no wonder she's a global phenomenon.

borrowing pieces because you genuinely like them, great. If you're editing yourself to match him, that's something else. The test is simple: When you look in the mirror, do you still see yourself? If yes, it is probably a sign of healthy intimacy, not erasure.

I feel closer to my partner when we talk openly about pleasure. Can transparency itself be an aphrodisiac?

When you can talk about pleasure, you're not guessing; you are collaborating. That kind of honesty builds safety, and safety makes room for play. Sometimes the conversation itself is just simple and straightforward: I trust you.

The new person I'm dating compliments

my appearance more than anyone else ever has, and I admit it makes me feel more confident. Is this a good thing?

Inherently, when praise comes from someone close to you, it lands differently. Because it's not just about how you look—it's about being desired by someone who knows you intimately. It's okay if that kind of affirmation feels great, but try not to center it too much. It's easy to get lost in a new relationship, and you don't want to end up in a situation where you depend on your partner for validation. I'd suggest making some plans in the next few weeks that don't involve them. Sometimes it's helpful to remind yourself of the life you have outside a relationship.

Have more questions? Get answers by DMing or emailing AskWilla@cosmopolitan.com.

SKIN IN THE GAME



All clothing **Gucci**,
earrings **Pandora**.

The Alix Earle Effect

After building a massive audience online, the 25-year-old is channeling her success into a skincare brand.

Photographed by HUY LUONG ■ Styled by JESSICA NEISES
Written by JASMINE HYMAN

A

few years ago, Alix Earle was posting viral GRWM TikToks while attending the University of Miami. Today, she has nearly 15 million social media followers and an estimated net worth of \$20 million. She was a runner-up on *Dancing With the Stars* and in a Super Bowl halftime show and will soon star in an upcoming Netflix reality show. Fans adore that she treats them like confidants, letting them in on both the glamorous and messy parts of her life. They also really, really love the candid way she shows and talks about her acne.

Breakouts are something Alix has dealt with for most of her life. "My mom would help me cover my skin before school," she tells me, "but I went to a Catholic middle school where we weren't allowed to wear makeup, so I was always getting in trouble." That bred an insecurity that followed her to high school, where, she says, she constantly compared her skin to that of her friends.

She tried Accutane three separate times and weathered years of breakouts, all while finding most available skincare overly clinical or ineffective, she says. "I could never go into Sephora and grab all the fun viral products because I always felt like they were going to break my skin out."

The cycle continued until 2024, when she started developing her own solution: Reale Actives, a line of products that includes a cleansing balm, an exfoliating cleanser, a moisturizer, and a mandelic acid serum. After Alix announced the official launch on her socials this spring, opinions spread like wildfire. I couldn't scroll on TikTok without seeing videos of cosmetic chemists, aestheticians, or skincare enthusiasts giving their two

cents on the branding or questioning the ingredients list. Chronically online as always, Alix jumped in with dermatologist Kiran Mian, MD, to explain each formula before the products even went on sale. When they did days later, everything sold out in less than 24 hours.

As a beauty editor and someone with sensitive, acne-prone skin of her own, I approach every new skincare brand (especially ones from celebrities) with a healthy dose of skepticism. But after trying out Reale Actives, I was immediately impressed. None of its formulas broke me out nor did they irritate my face or create any redness. Instead, after using the products on repeat, my skin has been looking smoother and brighter.

I appreciate the packaging, too, an aspect that was really important to Alix. The entire line, she says, is exactly what she wishes she had growing up: "really great, efficacious formulas in fun packaging."

Alix knows her products won't be a cure-all for her or her millions of followers with acne, but that's kind of the point. "Real you is perfect you" is our mantra," she says. "That's how the brand's name originated. You have to learn to love your real skin. If that means you have some redness, texture, or pores, that's a beautiful thing. I've found that the moment I truly accept those imperfections is often

when I start to see the most improvement."

The fact that she lets her fans see those imperfections adds to Reale Actives' appeal. Is it savvy brand marketing? Sure. But Alix also wants people to understand that they're more than their breakouts. "I don't want to stop living my life because of my skin," she says. "Sharing that message feels really important to me." ■



"I could never go into Sephora and grab all the fun viral products because I always felt like they were going to break my skin out."

—ALIX EARLE

From left: **Get Bare** Makeup Melting Cleansing Balm, \$29; **Pore Power** Exfoliating Gel Cleanser, \$28; **Go Deep** Mandelic Acid Serum, \$39; **Dew More** Barrier Boosting Moisturizer, \$36, realeactives.com.



Am I “Too Happy Being Single”?

Despite what the internet may tell you, there's no such thing. Inside the discourse around being unattached by choice.

By KAYLA KIBBE



If you're a straight woman who's currently unattached and living your best life, I'd recommend keeping that to yourself. Not because the information itself is so very damning but because there's no socially acceptable way to convey it—no safe way for those words to land right now. Tell someone you're genuinely happy being single and they'll walk away assuming you're either secretly sad or secretly spiteful, hiding behind a smoke screen of delusion or smugness. You're either pitiful or bitter, a charity case or a lost cause. Either way, you sound like a liar.

The only exception is, as far as I can tell, if you make it clear that you're only okay with being single *for now*, that you just haven't met the right person yet or aren't ready to start dating so soon after a breakup. In some cases, this kind of temporary singlehood is even encouraged. After all, you have to learn to love yourself first, right?

But the friend—or family member or colleague or mentor—who insists you need to figure out how to be happy on your own rarely means that you should be happy on your own forever. The subtext is that you should only do so in the interest of bettering yourself for a future relationship. Get your “slut era” out of your system now so you're not tempted to cheat down the line. Focus on bettering yourself today so you can soon be worthy of someone else tomorrow. And whatever you do, be careful not to prioritize yourself *too* much. You're loving yourself into a new relationship, not out of needing one altogether. If you're suddenly single *and* content to remain so, you've gone way too far.

Or have you? It's the question at the root of this entire “too happy being single”

ILLUSTRATION: MARY FAMA/GETTY IMAGES



DIP INTO THE SEASON

Ranch Spinach Dip

- Hidden Valley® Original Ranch® Dips Mix Packet
- 16 oz. container of sour cream
- 10 oz. frozen spinach, chopped, thawed, and drained
- 8 oz. water chestnuts, drained and chopped



moment, which asks whether being unpartnered and unbothered is the ultimate flex or a slippery slope to winding up forever alone. For every TikTok that tells us we're better off single than settling for the bare minimum from men, there's another post warning us not to get so used to riding solo that we end up surrendering to a lifetime of loneliness.

In my experience, the truth is definitely fraught but a lot more complicated. In a society that conditions women to pursue romantic partnership as the most important capstone of a female life well-lived, women don't just decide they like being single one day and accidentally unlearn centuries of internalized misogyny. The fear that we'll be too happy to get married once we get a taste of single life is as insulting as it is a hilariously transparent attempt to scare us out of our own liberation. And even if women becoming blissfully single to the point of forgoing romantic partnership were actually a problem, it wouldn't be *our* problem. It'd be the patriarchy's, which is a win in my book.

That said, I'd be lying if I said I'd never felt afraid or that there's no truth to the idea that women who do genuinely manage to embrace being single may find that status tough to give up. As a recovering male-validation addict who has drastically deprioritized my dating life in the past two years, I can confirm that if you stay single long enough to develop self-worth, it gets a lot harder to will yourself to go on a date and a lot easier to imagine a future in which you may never do so again. And with trends like decentering men, dating sabbaticals, and boy sobriety currently on the rise, I suspect other women may have also begun to stumble upon similar revelations.

Still, as much as I reject the idea that women can be "too happy being single," I'm not immune to Single Guilt, even as a person who's been more or less single and more or less fine with it for most of my adult life.

Having grown up surrounded by nothing but positive models of dutifully norm-abiding relationships in a family with a shockingly low divorce rate, I have zero business being this chill about my single status. Yet somehow, from an early age, I had an inkling that I might like being single and have a vague skepticism toward traditional relationships. Gradually, evidence seemed to suggest that I was right: Not only did I like being single, but it seemed like I might even prefer it. From my first-ever breakup, I've been keenly aware that I instantly feel more like myself—and more complete—once I'm out of a relationship. And that maybe that makes more sense than we've always been led to believe.

I've often framed my more or less long-term single status as something largely unintentional—not an accident but not an active choice either. More recently, it's occurred to



Women don't just decide they like being single one day and accidentally unlearn centuries of internalized misogyny.

me that maybe I've been choosing myself the whole time.

Even as I've grown more secure in my singleness—more aware that it is a choice and quite possibly the best one for me—I've always maintained that I remain open to the possibility of a long-term or even life partnership in the future. But these days, I'm not sure how much I really mean it. Time and again, I've proven more willing to sacrifice companionship for the sake of freedom than the other way around. And the longer I'm single, the happier I am to remain so.

I realize this may sound like proof of the "too happy being single" narrative that I've just rejected. But to me, it only confirms my suspicion that I am perhaps innately single rather than situationally so—that my singleness is not a matter of lacking a partner but of being a self-contained entity that would be more burdened than bolstered by any full-time addition. That I may, perhaps, have been born to be single for life.

For the most part, this increasing embrace of my singleness feels like growth. But sometimes, I do wonder whether retreating from my dating life and distancing myself from the possibility of partnership is more about avoidance than evolution. I'm not worried that I'm too happy being single, per se,

but I have considered that I may be getting too comfortable.

People convince themselves that they're happy in relationships all the time when really they're just too comfortable to risk rocking the boat. Am I doing the same thing with being single—deluding myself into thinking I don't want a relationship in order to avoid the risks that come with pursuing one? Is this maturity or stagnation? Am I enlightened or simply exhausted? Am I settling, after all, but just for myself?

Frankly, I can't say for sure that any of these fears are totally invalid. If I've learned anything from the public exercise in self-examination I call a career as a love and relationships journalist, it's that every time I think I've ripped off the last Scooby-Doo mask to reveal which version of myself has been the real one all along, it turns out I've only uncovered another defense mechanism. It's entirely possible that convincing myself I'm destined to be single for life when really I'm just settling for it is the latest in a long line of lies I didn't know I was telling myself.

But even so, I'd still rather settle for myself than for anyone else. ■

KAYLA KIBBE is the associate love and identity editor at *Cosmopolitan*, where she writes about love in its many forms.



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The Summer AI Turned Sexy

Expert insight on the bots
blowing up your phone.

By KAYLA KIBBE



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What's so appealing about AI sexting?

Generally speaking, people are sexting with AI because of course they are—sex has always driven the creation of new technology, and that technology, in turn, has bred new ways of engaging sexually with it, says psychologist Michelle Drouin, PhD. Adds sex therapist Casey Tanner, “Sexual communication can feel vulnerable or high-stakes. People use AI as a way to explore with a reduced fear of being rejected or getting it ‘wrong.’”

It's no surprise that artificial intelligence is having a sexual awakening. Reports of people getting intimate with ChatGPT and the like have dominated the discourse as AI continues to make its way into nearly every aspect of our lives. And with the rise of virtual relationships has come AI sexting—and all its real-world implications.

Redditors are outing their partners for exchanging steamy texts with bots, while DatingAdvice.com partnered with the Kinsey Institute to determine whether sexting with an AI lover counts as cheating on a human one (per the survey, 32 percent of respondents said it does). Nearly 20 percent of people in a separate Lelo report said they'd passed off AI-written texts as their own.

What does all of this mean for anyone dating or in a relationship right now? That's exactly what I asked leading sex and technology experts. Keep reading for their (entirely non-AI-generated) answers.

Are most people sexting *with* AI or just asking bots to draft their own sexts...

Both! Some are using AI to hone their craft for the benefit of human sext partners, says sex educator Sarah Tomchesson. Others are sexting AI directly as a substitute for human sexual interaction.

Is it safe though?

It depends on how comfortable you are with risk. Tanner notes potential concerns around privacy, consent, and mental health. Tomchesson adds that any data shared with AI is not protected, so users should avoid sharing sensitive information when they can.

...and which is more common?

Reports of human-on-bot sexting may grab more headlines, but Tanner says the majority of people use AI as a behind-the-scenes way to enhance interhuman sexting: “It isn't always about finding a substitute for a partner. It's about finding the right words or testing ideas.”

Is it possible to become a little too dependent on AI sexts?

It is. “AI is a tool—not a reciprocal being. Tech should amplify erotic exploration, not override it,” says Tomchesson. “When AI becomes the only tool in your sexual tool kit, your capacity for intimacy can shrink. If you find that engaging with AI starts to prevent you from initiating human connection, pull back.”

Are there any real benefits?

Absolutely. Tomchesson compares sexting with AI to sexting with training wheels on, which may help users “learn the language that turns them on, build confidence, and explore fantasies.”



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Stronger Hair at the Source

YOUR NEW SKINCARE ROUTINE
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It's time to rethink your haircare routine—because healthy hair doesn't begin with your strands. It starts at the source: your scalp.

And let's be honest, your scalp is skin that's often overlooked. That's why Dove partnered with leading dermatologists and skincare experts to create Dove Derma Scalp, delivering science-backed care where it counts. Powered by clinically proven actives, each formula helps nourish your roots without a greasy or heavy residue.

Do you have scalp discomfort or flakiness? Both are very common because your scalp is skin, after all. If you're concerned with itchy dryness or visible flakes, Dove Derma Scalp Dandruff Relief is designed to help eliminate flakes and address dandruff using salicylic acid, leaving your scalp



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*Dandruff Relief system
vs. non-conditioning shampoo

visibly healthy. Lamellar serum and niacinamide help nourish roots, leading to resilient hair fibers that are more resistant to breakage.

Pair the Dandruff Relief shampoo and conditioner with the lightweight Barrier Repair serum to regenerate your scalp's moisture barrier and provide relief from dryness, tightness, and discomfort.

If you simply want to optimize your overall scalp health, Dove Derma Scalp Density Boost collection purifies your scalp without stripping its natural essential oils. The science-proven skincare and haircare system revitalizes both scalp and hair to create a clean, healthy environment for hair to thrive.

The result: thicker, stronger, and fuller-looking hair from root to tip.

Bottom line: Don't skip your scalp. Healthy hair begins with a solid foundation, so make Dove Derma Scalp an essential part of your haircare—and skincare—routine. ■



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Derma Scalp collection
on Amazon or visit Dove.com
for more information.**

Welcome Back, Eyeshadow

Our Is It Just Us series celebrates trends that are taking over the culture.

In this installment: the makeup that's suddenly everywhere again.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT
Written by BETH GILLETTE

MAKEUP BY KAROL RODRIGUEZ FOR MAYBELLINE NEW YORK. ROW 1: AUDREY TRULLINGER, NICO LOU MONHEIM CARRASQUILLO, ISZE COHEN, YEHA LEUNG, ALINA TIMO. 2: DANI PARKES, CYRUS VEYSSI, MICHELLE LI, KITTY LEVER, YU LING WU. 3: LOVISA LAGER, LAUREN EZERSKY, LAURA PITCHER, AMBER MARK, CASSANDRA LEE. 4: SOPHIA HERNANDEZ, OBLIVION, OCEAN VANEXEL. 5: BIANCA MAIOCCCHI, ERI WAKIYAMA, RYAN BAILEY POTTER, HANNAH PINSON, LEXA GATES.



A decade ago, we were living in the age of cut creases and Urban Decay Naked palettes. A selfie just didn't look right without a warm-toned smokey eye (like model Emira D'Spain's in the full-page photo at left). Then the whole "clean girl aesthetic" happened and eyeshadow all but disappeared. Now, decorated lids have gone mainstream again, from our For You Pages to the office to the bar to the red carpet, all following the only new rule: More is more. Here and at [Cosmopolitan.com/eyeshadow](https://www.cosmopolitan.com/eyeshadow), 24 people show off their maximalist looks.

Lip Service

This summer is all about a juicy gloss.

Photographed by KIM SUN HYE
Written by JASMINE HYMAN



"Using a stain with a thin tip allows for a precise application that won't budge. This oil on top will hydrate, plump, and add pigment in one swipe."

—JASMINE HYMAN,
ASSISTANT BEAUTY EDITOR

Summer Fridays Flushed Lip Stain, \$22, summerfridays.com; **YSL** Loveshine Plumping Lip Oil Gloss, \$40, yslbeautyus.com



"I love the look of a soft, overdrawn lip with a wet-like finish. I line my lips with this pencil for dimension, then layer on a glossy tint that settles into a long-lasting stain."

—BETH GILLETTE,
BEAUTY EDITOR

m.ph The Overliner Lip Pencil, \$25, mphbeauty.com; **Laneige** JuicePop Box Lip Tint, \$23, us.laneige.com

ALL PRODUCT IMAGES ARE COURTESY OF BRANDS.



"I'm a lip minimalist, and this set requires no effort (or mirror) to get right. I scribble on the nude liner for quick definition and add the sheer pink gloss on top for a pillowy result."

—LAUREN BALSAMO,
BEAUTY DIRECTOR

Versed Lip Frame Defining Lip Liner, \$14, versedskin.com; **Anfisa Skin** An-Gloss Ceramide Lip Tint, \$45, anfiskasin.com



"This Kulfi liner glides on without dragging and stays put all day, while Typology's oil has the pigment of a glossy lipstick but feels more like a yummy balm."

—JULEE WILSON,
BEAUTY EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Kulfi Lassi Lips Staining Lip Liner, \$24, kulfibeauty.com; **Typology** Tinted Lip Oil T40, \$33, us.typology.com

Use Protection

If you commit to one thing this summer, please let it be sunscreen.

Photographed by LINDSAY ELLARY
Styled by REBECCA JANE HILL
Written by LAUREN BALSAMO

As *Cosmopolitan's* beauty director, it is my duty to remind you that SPF is, hands down, the most important step in your skincare routine. That's true year-round, but it becomes especially crucial in the summer months, when the UV index is at its highest. (Another refresher: Exposure to UV rays is the primary cause of skin cancer. It also leads to signs of premature aging, like dark spots and wrinkles.)

I also know that historically, sunscreen hasn't been the most exciting or aesthetically pleasing product to use, especially on your face. But the latest launches are changing that narrative, making applying—and reapplying—SPF feel more enjoyable and less like smearing on goo. At right, you'll find lotions and gels that blend seamlessly into any skin tone, a light-reflecting pick that doubles as a primer, and a cute little stick for on-the-go moments. Add one or all to your summer beauty lineup—I promise your future face will thank you. ■



FOR A CLEAR FINISH
Matte and totally clear, this gel-like formula sets to an invisible water-resistant finish.

Neutrogena Ultra Sheer Invisible Face Gel SPF 40, \$17, amazon.com



FOR A GLOWY BASE
This SPF-infused primer creates a smooth, long-lasting canvas for any type of makeup look, including the ones you see here.

Ciele Prime & Protect SPF 30+ Radiate Smoothing Primer, \$38, sephora.com



FOR ACNE-PRONE SKIN
The OG version doesn't clog pores, but this new one takes things a step further by actively treating pimples.

EltaMD UV Clear Blemish-Prone & Oil Balancing SPF 50, \$49, amazon.com



FOR QUICK TOUCH-UPS
Stash this in your bag to make reapplication easy. Its velvety finish won't feel sticky on skin.

Bubble Sun Rise Mineral Sunscreen Stick SPF 40, \$15, hellobubble.com



FOR SENSITIVE SKIN
Even though it's made with 15 percent zinc (and a bunch of skin barrier-healing ingredients), it has no white cast.

SkinCeuticals Future Mineral UV Defense SPF 50, \$60, skinceuticals.com



Bikini **Tropic of C.**
Earrings **Briwok**,
necklaces **Hera** and
(bottom) **Swarovski**.

Opposite page: Top
Casablanca, earrings
Sandralexandra.

Hair by Erin Piper
Herschleb at Tracey
Mattingly using Oribe.
Makeup by Deanna
Melluso at Forward
Artists using Essence
Cosmetics and Catrice
Cosmetics. Model: Tehya
Elam at Freedom
Models. Shot on location
at Windjammer
Landing Resort &
Residences, Saint Lucia
(@windjammerlanding).

Crown Work

Beauty editor-at-large **Julie Wilson** celebrates the cultural and emotional power behind every braid install.



A

set of fresh braids means something. Black women don't get them only because they're cute, although of course they are that, too. We get them because we're preparing—

for rest, romance, adventure, reinvention. They're a protective style but also an act of proactive beauty.

I still remember being a kid, sitting on the floor between my Aunt Elaine's legs as she braided my hair and we laughed at a TV comedy marathon to pass the time. Many hours later, I stood up with waist-length box braids swinging down my back like I'd unlocked a new level of fly. I can now see this experience for what it really was: a lesson in patience and love that I didn't even know I was learning. Braids are about endurance, care, and tradition. Somebody taking the time.

Braids also carry so much history, so many crucial reminders. Cornrow designs once mapped escape routes during slavery. Women braided grains of rice into their hair for sustenance on their journeys, literally weaving in what we needed to survive. Today, the stakes are different but the symbolism remains.

Even in a bustling braid shop packed with busy hands tethered to countless crowns of hair, there is an overwhelming sense of being part of something special. And I love the rituals behind each look. There are vacation braids, for which the appointment on your calendar is

basically a boarding pass. There are birth braids that let you focus on contractions and cuddles instead of wash day. There are back-to-school braids, prom braids, breakup braids, new-job braids...the list goes on and on. There isn't a milestone that wouldn't benefit from—or be made better by—some badass plaits, be they cornrows, box braids, knotless braids, Fulani braids, goddess braids, or stitch braids.

Each style speaks its own language and tells its own story, something our pop culture icons know well. Living rent-free in my head are Janet Jackson's iconic jumbo box braids in the movie *Poetic Justice*. Alicia Keys' signature micro straight backs. Serena Williams and Venus Williams serving braids, beads, and backhands. Lisa Bonet's boho-chic installs. And Beyoncé leaning backward out of a car window in her *Lemonade*-era honey-hued, sideswept plaits.

Braids are art and ancestry, a love letter to where we've been and where we're going. They're also a fuss-free flex, and the products on the next page will help get you ready for whatever comes next. ■

*With light,
Julie*



So fresh and so clean!

INSTANT AHH

A must-have spray for soothing itchiness, cutting buildup, and making your scalp feel fresh again.
Cécred Scalp Refreshing Spray, \$38, cecred.com



Laid + slayed

SLEEK BEHAVIOR

It lays your edges and creates the crispest parts and sections for a polished final look.
Curl Queen HydraHold Edge Control, \$26, curlqueenofficial.com



GLOSS MODE

A few drops of this lightweight oil (it smells like wealth and abundance!) will bring dry braids back to their glory.
Charlotte Mensah Manketti Hair Oil, \$55 for 100 mL, dermstore.com



One Word: Serious!

HOLD UP NOW

Most hair clips can't handle the volume, but this magnetic snap design makes ponytails and buns actually doable.
Breromi Magnetic Hair Star Clique, \$45, breromi.com



STAY PUT

Frizz and flyaways don't stand a chance with this foam that keeps braids neat, shiny, and locked in place.
Aunt Jackie's Curls & Coils Biotin + Honey Ready, Set, Hold! Braid Setting Foam, \$12, amazon.com



GROWTH ERA

Protective styles give your hair a break, but your scalp still needs love. This nutrient-rich serum keeps things happy and healthy.
Highbrow Hippie Root Replenish Active Growth Serum, \$88, highbrowhippie.com



My Voluntarily Celibate Year

I thought sex was something I didn't need. It turns out I was looking for pleasure in the wrong places.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT ■ Styled by KAIA CARIOLI ■ Written by ELLA SNYDER



Dress and bra **No. 21**,
underwear **Araks**, sunglasses
Selima Optique, watch
Cartier, ring **Ray Griffiths**.

In high school, most of my friends were having sex. I never felt horny, but I didn't think I was necessarily asexual either. I did, after all, have parasocial relationships with both Harry Styles and Justin Bieber.

By college, I felt ready to explore sex more meaningfully, but I had zero clue what I enjoyed, what to do, or even what I wanted. My hookups ranged from awkward (the guy with whiskey dick) to traumatic (a one-night stand who I later realized was situationally unhoused and just looking for a place to stay). I started questioning if I even wanted sex at all.

Then Cole* and I started dating. He saw me and my struggle and made sex a lot more conversational and, in turn,

exciting. I learned that it could sometimes be enjoyable, too, especially in a nurturing relationship. But after Cole and I broke up, I worried that I wouldn't feel safe enough with anyone else to be able to find pleasure in sex again.

My first few post-breakup encounters affirmed that fear. I found myself back in the beds of men who did more harm than good for my relationship with sex—men I felt I had to convince to want me due to my transness. After those experiences, I made the decision to protect my peace and practice celibacy for a full year. I would focus on my healing instead, and over time, I felt stronger and a lot more holistically connected to myself. Through it all, I didn't miss sex one bit.

But while a life without sex wasn't a struggle and I didn't feel horny, I did still feel like I was missing *something*. I addressed my low libido one day during therapy, telling my therapist I thought I may be asexual and that the possibility scared me. "I'm already trans," I said, "and I struggle with my mental health—I don't want to be asexual, too." I couldn't imagine tacking on one more identifier that signaled I was, once again, different from everyone else. Not a ton came from that conversation or from a following appointment, so I found solace in my friends.

I asked my other surged dolls (transfemmes who'd also had vaginoplasties) if they ever felt this way, but they couldn't relate. Most had felt sexual in their biological anatomy, and their sensuality was only heightened in their affirmed bodies. To my surprise, it was my non-trans friends who had experienced similar droughts. So many cis women in my world were voluntarily celibate because they also didn't enjoy sex. We all had been questioning whether we could be asexual, only to eventually realize we do desire sex, just not the sex we'd been having.

Commiserating over failed sexual endeavors and feelings of sexual inadequacy with my *cisters* ended up being surprisingly gender affirming. My feelings around yearning to belong finally dissipated, just not in ways I anticipated or expected. And in time, I longed to date again and experience the physical intimacy that came with it.

I set my sights on a male model I had worked closely with a couple of times and invited him on a date. Levi* knew I was trans, so I never had to come out to him. But when we went home together, a conversation still seemed necessary.

He was receptive and eager to explore with me, ensuring I felt seen and safe. Even with communication, though, the hookup felt awkward and unnatural, albeit not unpleasant, and I still left feeling enlightened. I found so much power in trying again, and I was so proud of myself for confronting and conquering my fears around sex with someone new.

I showed myself that sex with a new partner can absolutely be exploratory, conversational, safe, and enjoyable. I felt assured that I could do it again—and, more importantly, that I wanted to. ■

ELLA SNYDER is a model, photographer, and writer living in New York City. When she's not on set, she's in a method acting class or drafting a diaristic entry for her Substack, *Esoteric It Girl*.

Class of 2026

At *Cosmopolitan*, The Sound of Now is our way of celebrating—through this special photo series and pull-out poster—the artists who are defining music in real time.

Photographed by HUNTER ABRAMS and SAM LEE ■ Written by WILLA BENNETT

Music buoys us through life's highs and lows. It's a truth that readers often share with me and that was on my mind during this year's Grammys weekend. As I moved through Sir Lucian Grainge's "Music Is Universal" 2026 Artist Showcase and UMG's gifting suite, where these photographs were taken, as well as the awards ceremony and its after-parties, I kept coming back to how the songs we love help us understand who we are becoming.

I have been lucky enough to meet many of the artists on these pages, and I can confirm that, collectively, they truly do make up the sound of right now, shaping the way we listen to and celebrate music and proving that emotional wisdom can live inside a hook. Each of them, in different ways, is expanding what pop, rap, country, jazz, and global music can hold: humor and heartbreak, softness and sincerity. Their work is about the feelings we return to, the stories we replay, and the messages that stick with us long after the song ends.

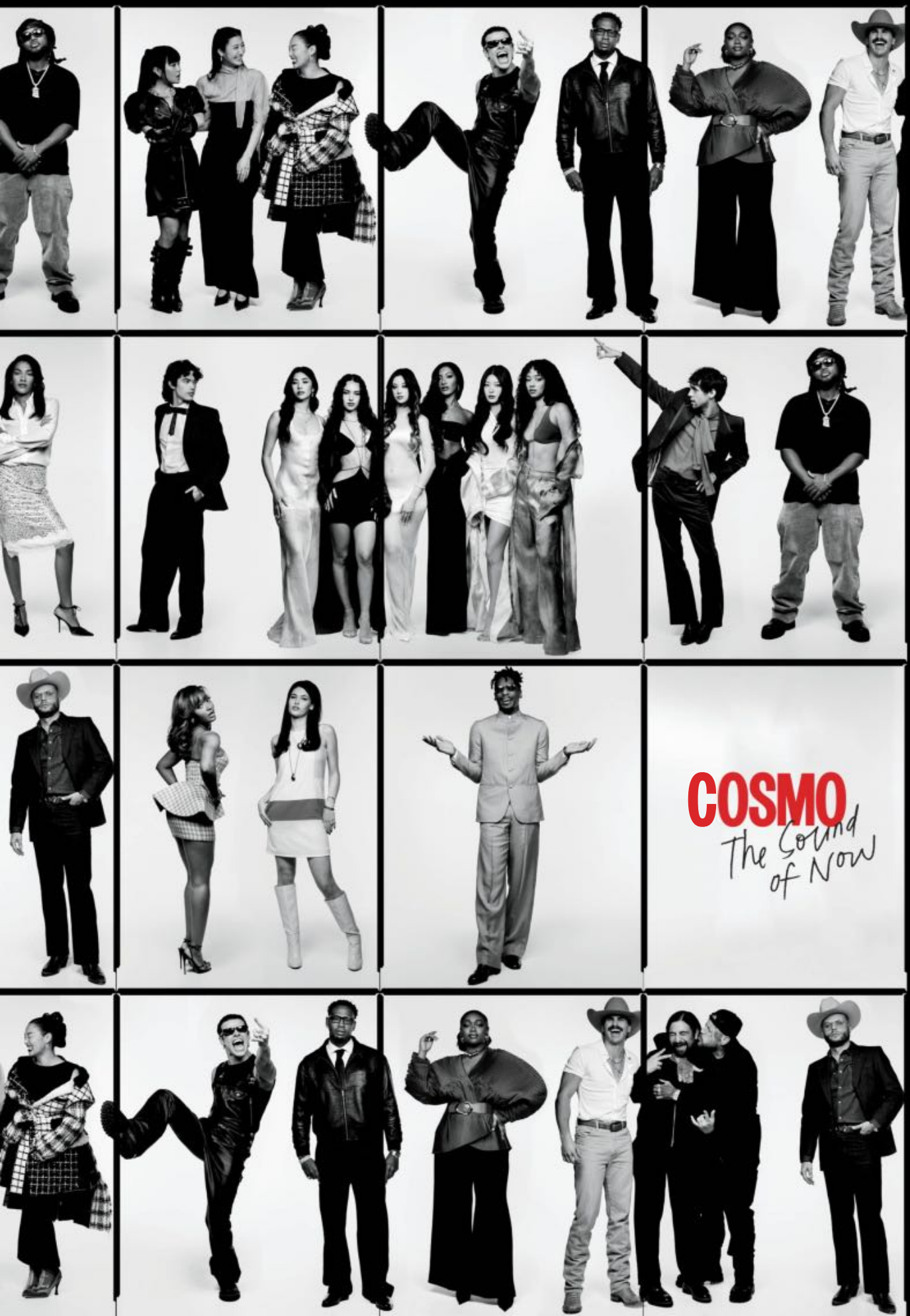


From top left, top to bottom: Olivia Rodrigo; Olivia Dean; Conan Gray; KATSEYE (Sophia Laforceza, Daniela Avanzini, Megan Skiendiel, Lara Raj, Yoonchae Jeung, and Manon Bannerman); Stephen Sanchez; Leon Thomas III; HUNTR/X from *KPop Demon Hunters*: REI AMI, EJAE, and Audrey Nuna; YUNGBLUD; Moneybagg Yo; Samara Joy; Tucker Wetmore; Noah Kahan; Jelly Roll; Charley Crockett; Ayra Starr; Sienna Spiro; Jon Batiste.

Back of gatefold, from top left, top to bottom: Adéla; REI AMI, EJAE, and Audrey Nuna; YUNGBLUD; Freya Skye; Ayra Starr; Sienna Spiro; Lola Young; Audrey Hobert; Leon Thomas III; Rhea Raj; Tucker Wetmore.

Meet the stars captured in Polaroid at [Cosmopolitan.com/grammys-2026-gifting-suite](https://cosmopolitan.com/grammys-2026-gifting-suite).







PLAY ON

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the making of *Cosmopolitan's*
The Sound of Now.

PANDORA x COSMOPOLITAN

Inside *Cosmopolitan* and Pandora's Kickoff to Music's Biggest Weekend

Pandora and *Cosmopolitan* ushered in music's biggest weekend with 50 of their closest L.A. friends, gathering at Mother Wolf's Bar Avoja for an evening that felt equal parts intimate and electric. Guests stepped into a private room glowing in Pandora pinks and *Cosmopolitan* reds, defining the mood for the night ahead.

Editor-in-chief Willa Bennett kicked things off with a celebratory toast as dinner unfolded over plates of pizza and pasta. Throughout the evening, Pandora's signature details took center stage—gift boxes filled with a Pandora Music Note Mini Charm, along with an on-site engraver who invited guests to create pieces as personal as the moment itself.



1. Willa Bennett 2. Chelley Bissainthe and Serena Page 3. Tay Lautner
4. Kylie Cantrall, Alex Sampson, Dara Renée, and Stephen Dawes

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High Maintenance

We're all just trying to chill out. But can using weed end up causing skin issues?

By BETH GILLETTE



Now that marijuana is legal in so many states and so socially pervasive, it's no surprise that people—including me—publicly discuss when and why they use it. In my case, weed helps me sleep and reduces my anxiety, and being slightly blitzed while watching *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is the best way to end my day. But as I've added joints to my nightly routine, I've also noticed something else: My cheeks are looking slightly saggy, my skin has lost its glow, and my breakouts are worse than ever. One night, while taking a hit, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in my bedroom window, face covered in bright-green acne spot treatment. Could the two things be connected?

I called dermatologist Karan Lal, MD, who told me...maybe. He hasn't seen a difference in acne between his patients who use marijuana and those who don't. But he does point out that, while not enough conclusive research has been done, marijuana may slightly raise testosterone levels in your body. And when testosterone spikes, so does your skin's oil production, often leading to pimples. There's also a behavioral component at play when it's 2 a.m. and you're stoned, watching *Planet Earth* for the hundredth time and placing a greasy Uber Eats order.

Are you really washing off your makeup and changing out your pillowcase and spreading on your salicylic acid serum after that? Probably not.

"Marijuana is commonly associated with what we call a motivational syndrome—it makes people *not* want to do things," explains Dr. Lal. Including, potentially, things that are part of your normal skincare regimen.

The way you use weed may be a factor, too, as each form may interact with your skin in different ways. Edibles typically contain a lot of sugar, which could spike your blood sugar, causing glycation, a process during which sugar molecules weaken the collagen and elastin in your skin, leading to sagging and wrinkles. A blood sugar spike can also trigger breakouts. Smoking weed, on the other hand, could mean some of that smoke sits on your skin and can lead to free radical damage and inflammation. And if you're not regularly cleaning any pipes or pens you use, you might notice acne around your mouth from bacteria spread.

It's not all potentially bad news though. THC, one of the active substances in weed, can help reduce itching and irritation, which could go a long way for chronic skin pickers. "I would also argue that marijuana may reduce skin picking in some people because you're more relaxed," Dr. Lal says. Less picking generally means less scabbing and acne scarring. For others, weed could be a great way to relieve general tension or even some stress acne (stress increases a hormone called cortisol, which can spike inflammation and oil production, leading to breakouts).

It's likely that as even more states legalize and decriminalize weed, more studies will be done on how it affects skin. For now, while we wait for some definitive science, Dr. Lal advises weighing all possible factors and making informed decisions based on your own overall health and well-being. For me? A few breakouts are worth the zone-out. ■



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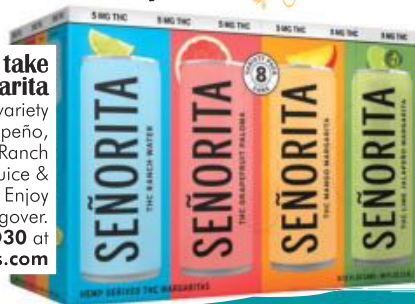
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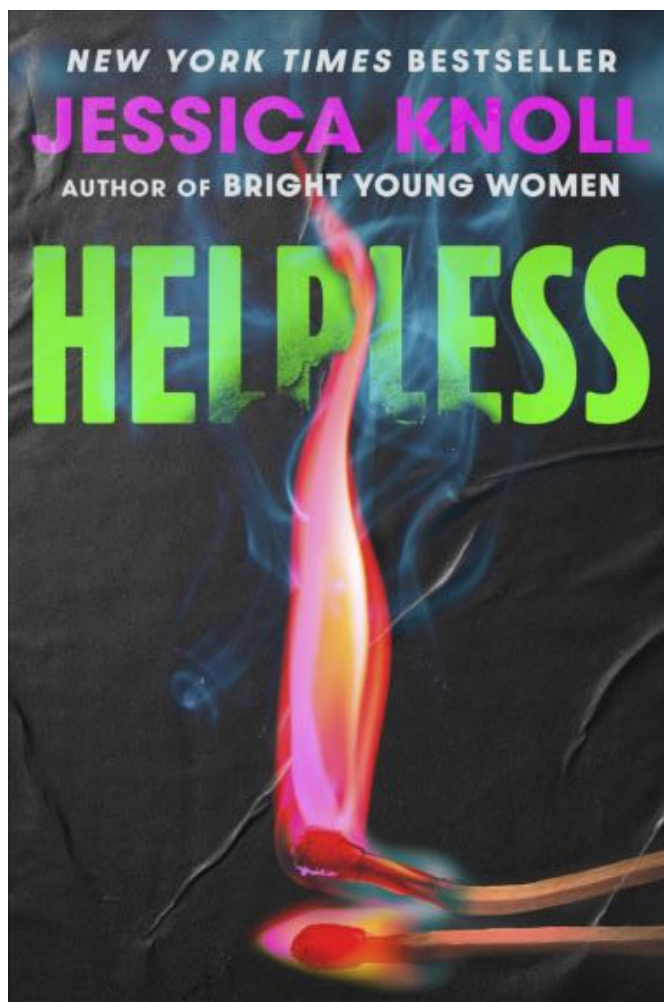
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The Enigmatic Power of Fear

Former *Cosmopolitan* editor and current best-selling author Jessica Knoll became a must-read after her debut novel, *Luckiest Girl Alive*. Here, she annotates an exclusive excerpt of her latest thriller, *Helpless*, and gets real about the power of giving in to our darkest fantasies.

Interviewed by TAMARA FUENTES

What was the spark for this novel: plot, character, or setting?

It was one of the characters, Henry. I wanted him to be like a fantasy of a dominant, almost menacing, passionate ex-boyfriend. And then this idea that he brought Faye, our main character, back to her alma mater—not for revenge but to protect her—was something that came out in a much later draft. Once I landed on that, everything clicked into place.

Faye is open about her sexual desire for dominance, something we're seeing a lot more of in female book characters these days. Why was this important in this particular story?

I am fascinated by this moment in pop culture. You see the popularity of tradwives and we now have a BDSM version of *Wuthering Heights*. Why do we—not all women but enough—fantasize about being in peril? I read something very interesting by a psychiatrist who wondered if women might have these fantasies about sexual violence not because they're weak and not because they're submissive but because they're actually very sexually aggressive themselves. And because that's not a quality we associate with women, the only way we can proxy aggression is if the man is the aggressive one in our fantasies. I love the theory that women who fantasize about these things are actually the exact opposite of these sexless, helpless women.

In your annotation here, you highlight the line, "Fear has taken me far." How has it done so in your own life?

Writing *Luckiest Girl Alive* was a fear-based decision. I'd been wanting to write a book for a while and when *Cosmopolitan's* editor-in-chief at the time announced her retirement, it was clear that other staff changes would be made. I watched people lose their jobs and I just thought, *I've got to have a plan B*. That is what motivated me to put pen to paper. Sometimes fear is very enlightening.

***Helpless* has moments of absurdity and comedy, but it's also a pretty dark thriller. How do you balance those things?**

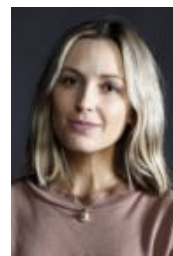
I've always kind of played in that playground. I guess that's the way I approach my life.

Have you ever gotten any critical feedback for that?

It doesn't ever occur to me that there's anything unusual about it until someone is like, "Oh, I'd love to read your book, but I'm just such a scaredy-cat." I'm like, "That scares you? It's soothing to me, puts me to sleep." It sounds strange, but it's what I'm comfortable and familiar with.

You're the first former *Cosmopolitan* editor we've featured in this column. How does that feel?

I was thinking a lot about full-circle moments writing this book, and it was ultimately how I decided to dedicate it to my writing professor who passed away a few years ago. Without him, I don't believe I would have the life that I have, because he was the one who helped me get an internship at a talent and literary agency, which is where I met my future literary agent and my future husband and my future best friend. It was from there that I went and worked at *Cosmopolitan* and got my start. I was only at the agency a year, but I understood that was the move I had to make. ■



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This is my fourth novel, but I got my start as a writer at the very magazine you are reading right now.

To get to Geneva, New York, the remote place where I wrote some of this book, it took two flights and a rental car—13 hours total.

Yes!!! Very!

Faye has no idea what she's stepping into here....



He did. Something big.

Where would the fun be in going to the police?

"I love LA," Emma declares. She says it on an exhale, and I am in no mood for this brand of youthful whimsy. I want to be alone, to lick my wounds, to think my strange thoughts.

"It's a great place to live," I say in a lackluster tone.

"I mean. I've only been there once. PT took us to visit Jonathan on set."

I nod. I remember the year they came. The show was still going, but we were on a hiatus, and my husband and I had taken a trip to Hawaii that went poorly for us.

"It's not easy to get there," Emma remarks. "From here."

There is some suspicion in how she says this. It is complete conjecture on my part, but my brain instantly leaps to a scenario where Emma knows that while of course I went to the trouble of returning to campus to honor PT, I was also hoping for a run-in with the ex who ruined me exactly the way I told him to. Paranoia is also an option here.

"I have a writing retreat planned for myself right after this."

I feel ridiculous, explaining myself to Emma, like I am a teenager whose parent has detected alcohol on my breath.

"Professor Toner canceled all his classes the day before he died. Did you know that?"

This is a very abrupt thing to say, and I don't know how to react, so I only shake my head. No. I did not know that.

"Do you think that's weird?"

I frown. Consider it. "Did he say why?"

"He didn't give a reason. Just sent out an email letting us know and gave us some reading to do."

"Okay," I say slowly, fitting this information in with what I know to be true. "He had a massive heart attack. From what I understand, people don't feel very well in the days leading up to that."

"He had Band-Aids. All over his hands." Emma demonstrates, turning her hands front to back.

I stop walking. "How do you know that?"

"I'm the one who found the body." *another one!*

I stare at Emma, gobsmacked. She's lying. To my face. About finding the body of our professor. "I thought it was the house cleaner."

"I mean, technically, yes. But he had emailed me the night before and asked me to come over first thing in the morning. She was already there when I got there. She told me he was upstairs in the bathroom, and so I ran up to check on him. And he was lying there and he had at least, like, ten Band-Aids, all over his hands, and I mean, clearly he had something to tell me. And then he died before he could."

Emma is wringing her hands, like she's nervous, but her eyes are also sheened with excitement. Maybe what she is saying is true, but from my vantage point, there is something unbelievable about her story.

"Did you tell the police this?"

"No. I left before they got there."

"Emma," I say, firmly, "if this is true, you need to be talking to the police, not me."

"Come on," Emma says with sudden, snotty force. And then she has the gall to roll her eyes at me.

"Come on what?" I repeat in a new, icy tone. Emma is displaying that overfamiliarity that I loathe in young people with dreams of becoming somebody. Fear is underrated. It's okay to show it, to certain people, in certain situations. Fear has taken me far.

Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you.

I did return to my college campus when my screenwriting professor passed away.

I wrote so much of this novel on solo writing retreats!

I love moments like this in a thriller—a piece of information that makes you tilt your head and say, "Huh?"

This is the first novel I've written where I no longer feel young, and no one is more surprised than me about how much I love that!



I believe this about my own life, too.

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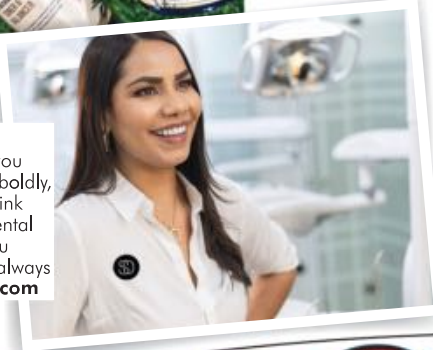
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SUMMER



FLING



This season,
fashion is playing
with humor.
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accordingly!

Photographed by **BOBBY DOHERTY**
Styled by **BRANDON TAN**
Written by **KIM DUONG**

On Roo: Dress **Junya Watanabe**, shoes **Roger Vivier**, earrings and necklace **Chopard**, gloves **Clyde**. On Delphine: Dress and bag **Fendi**, socks **Falke**, shoes **Alexandre Birman**, necklace **Chopard**, belt **Deborah Drattell**, gloves **Seymour**. On Lexi: Dress **Loewe**, shoes **Paris Texas**, necklace (top) and bracelet **Mikimoto**, necklace **Ben-Amun**. On Xiaorui: Dress and shoes **Dior**, earrings **Chopard**, watch **Cartier**.



SURF CITY

Swimsuits are tops
now and tropical prints
don't need a beach.

All clothing **Loewe**,
sunglasses **Akila**.

Opposite page, on Lexi:
All clothing and necklace
Dsquared2, sunglasses
Saint Laurent. On Xiaorui:
All clothing **Hermès**,
earrings **Zycloom**,
necklaces (top) stylist's
own, (middle) **Michael**
Kors Collection, and
(bottom) **Vertigo**, belt
Isabel Marant, bracelets
Kenneth Jay Lane.



BLINGY BRAS

Meet the LBB (Little Blingy Bra). Throw on some jeans and let her do all the talking.

On Lexi: Bra **Bode**, jeans **6397**, earrings **Pandora**, bracelet **Cartier**. On Delphine: Bra **Golden Goose**, jeans **Levi's**, earrings and bracelet **Misho**, bracelet (top) **Ben-Amun**.

Opposite page, on Roo: Bra **No. 21**, jeans **6397**. On Xiaorui: Top **Emporio Armani**, jeans **Levi's**, earrings **Misho**, bracelet **Ben-Amun**.







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Xiaorui at The Industry
Model Management, and
Delphine at Muse. Set
design by Caz Slattery.
Produced by Mini Title.





Olivia Rodrigo Rises

To everyone else, she is the queen of heartbreak.
I've always known better.

Photographed by MORGAN MAHER ■ Styled by BRANDON TAN ■ Interviewed by MADISON HU



Dress Ann
Demeulemeester,
underwear Pretties,
shoes Bode, pen-
dant For Future
Reference Vintage.



hen *Cosmopolitan*¹ asked me to write this cover story about my best friend Olivia Rodrigo, my first question for her was, “Can you bring a pack of cards?”

Most of the time, Olivia and I² are faced with the quandary of never being in the same place at the same time.³ It’s usually, *I’ll see you in two months when you’re in town. When is your next break from touring? How far is Vancouver from Los Angeles, really?* But the stars have aligned for this February morning in New York City, where we sit together in a hotel room, me in pajamas and Olivia in a trench coat and flare jeans, pregameing this interview with our favorite game, *Nertz*.

It’s a contentious match, and in the end, I win. I bask in my triumph while, as per her usual, Olivia is busy taking life lessons from a round of cards. “See, now this is why patience is key,” she self-soothes. “*Nertz* is my greatest teacher.” She’s joking, of course, but I know she’s also not entirely kidding.

Part of early adulthood is realizing you have more questions than answers, that everything you thought you’d have figured out by now remains a mystery. It’s an intimidating revelation but one Olivia leans into as she holds steadfast to a desire to learn from anything. I can attest that, just as she does in her music, she spends a lot of time in real life asking those questions—both the smaller, everyday ones and the unwieldy, daunting ones—driven by the same innate curiosity that bonded us more than a decade ago.⁴

Olivia’s willingness to admit to uncertainty, to the angst that comes with discovering who you are, is also what’s made her a voice of our generation. It started with 2021’s single “drivers license,” which she wrote during a pandemic heartbreak at 17, and continued on the emotionally raw, record-breaking album *SOUR*. Her second album, 2023’s *GUTS*, debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 and gave her tens of millions of fans exactly what they needed: a place to sit with growing pains and earnestly unravel their complexities through songs that felt at once universally true and deeply personal.

Two sold-out world tours, three Grammys, plenty of music festivals, and many global brand campaigns later, Olivia is now releasing a third studio album, *you seem pretty sad for a girl so in love*.⁵ If *SOUR* came pouring out of teenage heartbreak and *GUTS* was produced in a pressure cooker of expectation, this one, out June 12, was slower, a product of constant revisions. “We really

edited the hell out of this album,” she says about the body of work I’ve been lucky enough to listen to in all its many stages. There’s a new sense of levity in both her lyrics and her voice, echoing how she’s been feeling in real life. “There was so much more joy in the songwriting,” she explains. “There are some songs that are plain old sad but also some songs that are just plain old fun.”

The album’s first single is one of the latter, fizzy and bright and full of optimism,⁶ an almost visceral embodiment of her famous “happy and healthy” lyrics, only this time earnest and for her and her fans. It’s a track that couldn’t have happened five years ago—nor could any of the album’s songs, really. They’re a different type of interrogation, although not necessarily full of answers to those life questions. That’s because these days, Olivia is less concerned about arriving at conclusions. Instead, she’s exploring patience (thank you, *Nertz*) and romantic attachment, freedom, and joy through music that feels true to where she is right now.

1. A few weeks after this interview, Olivia Rodrigo spent an afternoon manifesting the year ahead with *Cosmopolitan* editor-in-chief Willa Bennett and shared that her dream headline for this story would be “Olivia Rodrigo Does It All and She Looks Really Cool Doing It.” Watch them vision-board together at [Cosmopolitan.com/olivia-rodrigo-2026](https://cosmopolitan.com/olivia-rodrigo-2026).

2. The “I” in this case is Olivia’s best friend, actor and Columbia University creative writing graduate Madison Hu. Of doing this story with her, Olivia later told *Cosmopolitan*: “I feel like I didn’t give her very eloquent answers, but she can decode my madness. She’s a million times smarter than I will ever be.”

3. Olivia spent much of the past year selling out nearly 100 live shows and recording a new album. Madison, at this point one of the only people in the world to have heard said album in its entirety, has been busy starring in the movie *Sparks* and alongside Steve Carell in the HBO comedy *Rooster*.

4. Olivia and Madison first connected at 12 years old when they auditioned for the Disney show *Best Friends Whenever*. They would later be booked on the same project, *Bizaardvark*, and go on a two-week Disney Cruise Line trip together: “We were like Beyoncé and Jay-Z on that boat,” laughs Olivia. Their friendship, which Olivia frequently documents on Instagram, is a fan favorite. Posts of them together regularly get more than 3 million Likes.

5. When Olivia pictures her fans experiencing the new record, it’s in a very specific way, she later told *Cosmopolitan*: “When I was younger and an album that my friends and I were really excited about would come out, we would go to the drive-through. Get Taco Bell and sit in the parking lot and listen. If people listen to my album top to bottom in a car with their friends drinking a Baja Blast, that’s the dream.”

6. Olivia told *Cosmopolitan* she wrote the song after a really great first date. “I just wanted to capture that first interaction you have with someone, like, *This could be the best thing ever; I’m going to tell all my friends*. It reminds me of running around a city, feeling young and free. I felt that a lot while writing the album.”

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socks Lovett and
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*"I want to make love
songs you can cry to."*



Top Marc Jacobs,
shorts No. 21.



You recently turned 23, and you were telling me the other day that it feels different than being 22.

I just feel a lot less afraid, in a good way. The year is off to a great start,⁷ although there was a crow in my backyard on my 23rd birthday,⁸ which...

Sometimes there's just a bird in your backyard. What was it you said yesterday while we were playing cards?

I was looking at your cards and I lost. I was like, "It's such a metaphor for life. If you're too busy looking at someone else's cards, you're not going to look at your own."

I swear you can take a lesson from anything. What was on your mind while making your new album?

I was really excited to write about joy, love, and passion in a way that I had never really done. Most of my big songs are about being sad, angry, heartbroken.

Do you find it harder to write about happiness?

It's not hard to do when I'm sitting there by myself in my room, but it was never the stuff that I put out. Sometimes I listen back to it and I cringe.

Is it cringier to be happy or sad?

It's cringier to be happy. I cringe, but I'm free. All of my favorite love songs have an element of sadness, and that's what makes them so beautiful. A great love song has so much emotion behind it that it could go either way. I want to make love songs that you can cry to.⁹

I remember after "drivers license," you felt this pressure to follow it up again and again and again. How has your songwriting process changed?

We didn't have time for revisions on *SOUR*. The whole world was watching. I wrote and we just fucking recorded and put it out. Then with *GUTS*, I was under so much pressure, like, *Oh my god, I'm never going to be able to make another good song*. It wasn't even making music to make music. It was making music to please people or prove something.

What about this new album?

With this album, I actually was like, "I'm done with the sophomore one. Now I can have fun again."¹⁰ I was writing songs the way I did when I was 16, purely for fun. There were some beautiful moments, like, "Whoa, it's flowing out," which feels like catching a butterfly¹¹ in a net.

And how have you changed from the person who made *SOUR* five years ago?

I was so young then and felt like the world was on my shoulders and that I had to have everything together.

I was motivated, but there was fear. Now I feel a lot more self-assured. My passion and work ethic come from a place of positivity rather than a scared mindset.

What's allowed you to be in this new place?

For five years, I got to travel the world, perform on awards shows that had always been dreams of mine.¹² It was trial by fire—if *I can get through this really high-pressure situation, I can get through anything*. But knowing I had people around me like you, I could go up onstage and miss a note and still be loved.

Do you think you've gotten better at coping with anxiety?

I'm serving anxious forever. I was really nervous the first 10 shows of the *GUTS* tour. It was hard to be away from home and not have any sense of normalcy. I was freaking out; my nervous system was crashing out. I still get anxious. It's just different than when I was younger.

You have a tactic for when you're nervous during a performance. Care to share it with the class?

I always pick out a person and just sing to them; everyone else is just on the side. Your mom came to my show at The Forum in L.A., and I did the whole show just to your mom. In my head, I was like, *Jennifer will love this*.

What did the *GUTS* tour teach you about yourself?

This sounds so cheesy, but the power of music. I had never been to the Philippines¹³ in my life, and being able

7. "Awesome things keep happening to me," Olivia later told *Cosmopolitan* about life at 23. "I'm Lucky Girl Syndrome-ing over here."

8. Fans speculated that Olivia used her 23rd birthday party vibes—crowns, light-pink hues—to tease her new music. She also wore light pink to both the Grammys and a Chloé show at Paris Fashion Week. And while vision-boarding with *Cosmopolitan*, Olivia mentioned the color multiple times.

9. Two of Olivia and Madison's favorite love songs to cry to are Bright Eyes' "First Day of My Life" and Nick Cave's "Into My Arms."

10. While chatting with *Cosmopolitan*, Olivia said about her new album: "It feels girly and reminds me of infatuation and fun. I just love all the girly things lately. I'm reclaiming my girliness."

11. Butterflies are a motif that Olivia used throughout the promotion of her first two albums, and her updated site logo also hints at a butterfly, making fans speculate whether the insect would be a big part of *you seem pretty sad for a girl so in love's* imagery, too.

12. Some of these include her performance of "drivers license" at the 2021 Brit Awards, "traitor" at the 2021 American Music Awards, "drivers license" at the 2022 Grammys, and "vampire" and "get him back!" at the 2023 MTV Video Music Awards. She's also appeared twice on *Saturday Night Live*.

13. Olivia is Filipino American, and while on set for her global *Cosmopolitan* cover shoot, she went out of her way to make a point to speak directly to her fans in the Philippines, sharing her favorite karaoke song ("Bohemian Rhapsody") and saying, "Whenever I do karaoke, I think, *Hell yeah, I'm Filipino!*"

to go there and play in an arena of 55,000 people is so crazy.¹⁴ I loved watching the young girls in the crowd sing songs like “traitor.”¹⁵

They’re 12 and they’re like, “You betrayed me.”

Whenever I talk to a 12-year-old girl, they tell me their story. They come up to me and they’re like, “My friend at school dropped me.” When you’re young, you take things so personally. You’re like, “It must be my fault!” When you’re older, it’s different.

What’s a boundary you’re really proud of setting recently?

I always thought a boundary was like, “Don’t do this.” But actually, a boundary is like, “If you do this, this is how I will react and protect myself.” It’s not about controlling other people, it’s about how you will respond: *If somebody does this, I will be okay because I have this plan in place of what I’m going to do.* It gives you so much more confidence and self-assuredness. And honestly, setting boundaries with yourself is really important, too. Saying you’re going to do something and actually doing it. For me, the phone stuff has got to go. Otherwise, I’m a brain rot person.¹⁶

Fill in the blank: If I do _____ in the next year, I’ll consider the year a success.

Even if my album flops and nobody likes it,¹⁷ if I feel like this is real, this is me, I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be,¹⁸ then it’ll feel like success. But personally, I’d love to be surrounded by people I love.

What phase of love are you in right now?

Oh my god. I’m in the most important phase, the friendship love that I’m sitting right across from. Best friend, community love. Dating is just the cherry on top.¹⁹

What have you learned about love lately that you wish you’d known sooner?

Patience. Things happen the way that they’re supposed to happen. It’s not supposed to be white-knuckle. But also, Madison, you’re the longest love of my life besides my parents. It’s like that book that I’m obsessed with, the Dolly Alderton book, *Everything I Know About Love*, I do for my female friends.²⁰

When did you realize our friendship was going to be a forever thing?

The first time we got drunk together. We must have been 15 and we snuck alcohol from someone’s parents’ liquor cabinet. We put it in a water bottle.

We took “shots” out of the water bottle cap. We were bonded forever after that moment.

I think of the way that we grew up, where we didn’t have a lot of people around us who weren’t

praising us at every moment. So we do really appreciate being hard on each other.

You know me in and out and still love me anyway, and you call me on my shit. That’s a true friend. Sometimes you’re hard on me when it comes to my music.

Look, what sounds good to me sounds good to me.

I wrote a song the other day that everyone else loved and you go, “That’s so cheesy. Why would you write that?”

I didn’t say it in that manner. I said, “This is my honest listening experience. I loved this, but I was hung up on this one line because it felt cheesy to me.” Do you think we’re also hard on each other when it comes to the people we’re dating?

It’s not us judging each other. And the partner is neither here nor there. It’s us like, *Who is my friend in this relationship? How does this person make her feel about herself? Is she happy?*

And is my best friend showing up as her authentic self with this person? Do you think our relationship has informed the way you’ve gone into romantic relationships?

No. We probably should integrate it, to be honest. Although, you’re a Gemini and three of the five guys I’ve dated in my life have been Geminis.²¹

14. This sold-out concert at the Philippine Arena near Manila was one of the biggest of her career. Her actual biggest may have been at last year’s Lollapalooza Argentina, where she performed in front of an estimated crowd of 150,000.

15. Livies remember where they were when “traitor” dropped on October 21, 2021. Its lyrics call out a past lover able to move on after only two weeks. Five years later, with 2 billion Spotify streams, it’s still *Cosmopolitan* HQ’s favorite song to cry to.

16. This perhaps explains why Olivia follows zero people on Instagram despite having more than 39M followers. Although she has hinted at various times that she does have a finsta. 17. Olivia admitted to *Cosmopolitan* that this already isn’t the case: “Chappell [Roan] has heard some of my new album. Obviously, I value her opinion so much. There’s one song she really likes that’s kind of Chappell-esque—a “don’t need no man” type of vibe—so that’s a good one.”

18. These words are lyrics from the stone-cold classic “This Is Me” by Demi Lovato and Joe Jonas, featured in the Disney Channel Movie *Camp Rock*.

19. Olivia won’t officially comment on her relationship status. She was most recently linked to actor Louis Partridge, whom she called out as a “boy from London” she was “really, really crushing on” during her 2025 Glastonbury Festival performance. While reflecting on that time later to *Cosmopolitan*, Olivia called it one of the best days of her life.

20. Those friends, Olivia later told us, are all about group chat input: “If something is going on and we need to make a decision about a boy or something, we text the chat and go ‘Jury Duty’ and the jury commences and decides.”

21. Olivia famously calls herself a spicy Pisces—it’s one of the few consistent pieces of branding from *SOUR* to *GUTS* to *OR3*. But you shouldn’t rely on her to embody that sign’s trademark discretion. “I have such a big mouth,” she told *Cosmopolitan*. “It’s one of my worst qualities. I always forget things are supposed to be a secret. Don’t tell me anything.”



All clothing
Colleen Allen.

"It's Cri
h

Dress **McQueen**.

Hair by Rena
Calhoun for Sisley
Paris. Makeup by
Melissa Hernandez
for Lancôme.
Manicure by Yoko
Sakakura for OPI.
Set design by Colin
Phelan. Produced
by Alexey Galetskiy
Productions.
Shot on location
at Sable Movie
Ranch, provided
by Métier Maison.



ngier to be
appy, but
I'm free."

We really value humor with each other.

We laugh like nobody's business.

That is one of my stipulations if I want to date someone: *Would they be okay sitting and hanging and playing cards with me and Madison?* If they can't hang with that, then they can't hang with me. Your partners have not been similar to me at all.

Not in any way. But I will say I'm looking for the feeling of comfort that I feel with you. And the amount of fun that I have with you, I want to have with my partner as well.

But no guy has ever made me laugh as hard as you've made me laugh. Not even a quarter.

What is a goal you have for yourself that has nothing to do with what we've talked about so far?

Since I was really young, I've been grinding. I want to have more hobbies, other things that bring me passion.²² I have my friends²³ and I have my work, but I feel like there's a third other space that I can tap into.

Which hobby is first on the list?

I am literally obsessed with yoga. I try to make you go with me all the time.²⁴

You're really good at it. You're doing handstands.

With songwriting, I want to get better at it always, but there's not really a clear trajectory. In yoga, it's like, *Oh, wow, I can touch my hands on the floor.* It's nice to have a binary: X amount of work equals Y amount of progress.

If you could go back to the day we met,²⁵ what would you tell that Olivia? The Olivia in the yellow sweater that looked like it had mops on it.

I would tell her not to wear some of the outfits that she did. And there's probably a boy or two that I'd be like, "Girl, you could have saved yourself the trouble."

And what do you want this next phase of your life to feel like?

I want to feel empowered, in control of my own life, calling the shots. I want to feel really creative. I've been getting so much joy from just being around people who are smart and cool. You are the number one person in that category. So more of that. ■

22. A few other things that Madison and Olivia currently obsess over: Wolf Alice, *Pen15*, and *Heated Rivalry* (they were in the audience when actor Connor Storrie hosted *Saturday Night Live*). About *Heated Rivalry*, Olivia later told *Cosmopolitan*: "It was inspiring as a creative person. These people took a big swing—they didn't compromise and I think that's so rad—and it paid off."

23. Along with Madison and Chappell, Olivia is close with Iris Apatow and Conan Gray—photos on social media show them picnicking or drinking cosmos together, as well as vision-boarding, which was the inspiration for her *Cosmopolitan* video with Willa Bennett.

24. In terms of other potential hobbies, Olivia told *Cosmopolitan*, "I don't know how to cook. I'm just eating a yogurt from the fridge, microwaving some Trader Joe's stuff. That's the next step of my adulthood: learning to feed myself like a real human being."

25. Olivia's first thought on seeing Madison way back when at that Disney audition: "Oh my god, that girl looks so stressed. And Maddie's first impression of me was, *This girl is so afraid.*"

COSMO
centerfold



ROB RAUSCH

Photographed by ORI HARPAZ ■ Styled by BRANDON TAN ■ Interviewed by MAXWELL LOSGAR

Jacket and pants **Mr. P.**
shirt stylist's own, bow tie
Brooks Brothers.



AGE: 27 SIGN: *Virgo*
RELATIONSHIP STATUS: *Taken*

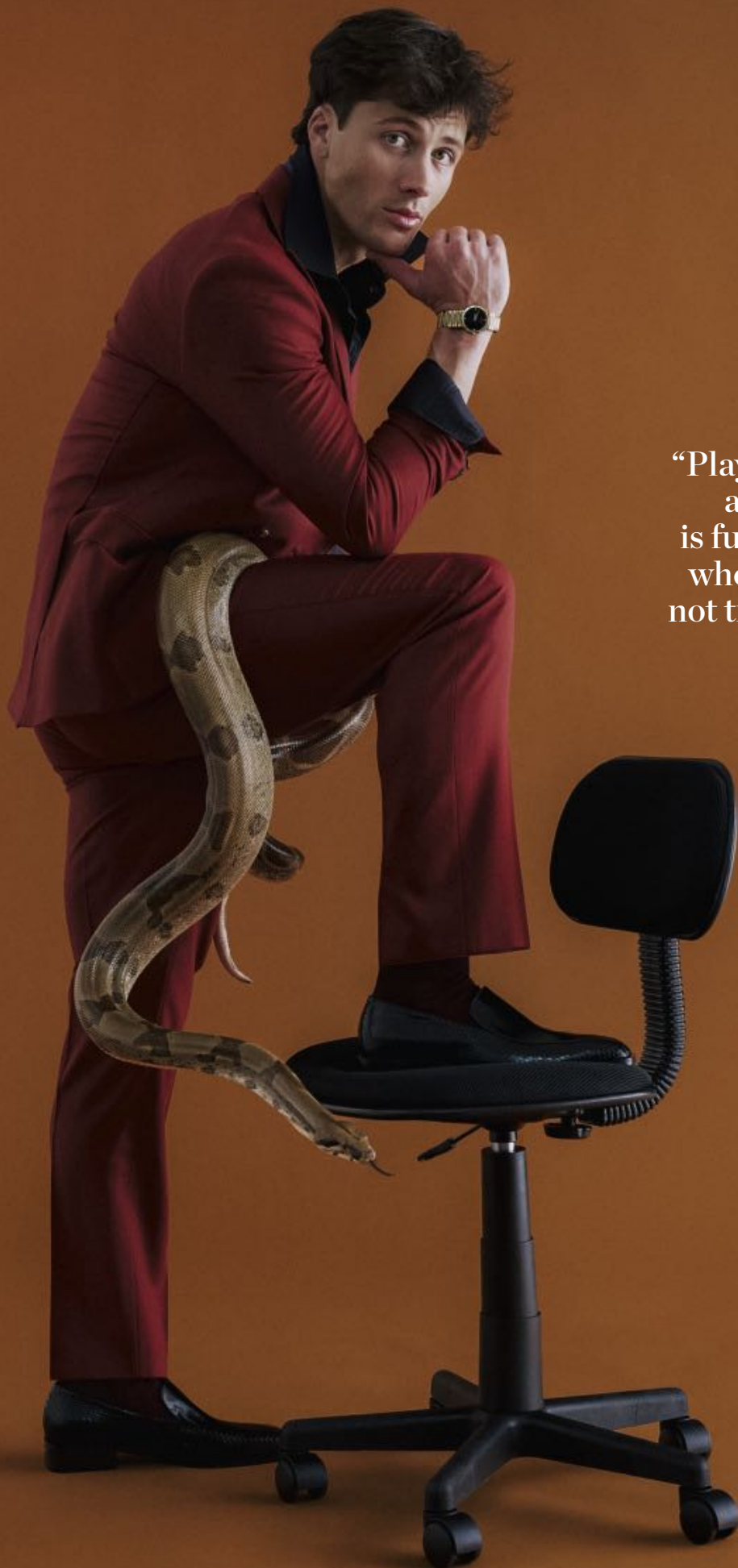
Rob Rausch is still adjusting. These photos happened just four days after the Southern snake wrangler outmaneuvered the competition to win *The Traitors* season 4. Already, his victory lap has been less of a lap and more of a sprint: Media outlets and the internet are obsessed; brand deals are pouring in. "I'm trying to make the most of my situation," he says, "but my brain is absolutely fried." The former *Love Island* contestant embodies a distinctly modern archetype, a kind of himbo genius. He's a tattooed outdoorsman who paints, loves photography, and plays piano, and his mix of charm, curiosity, and quiet calculation—not to mention his indifference to public opinion—makes him unique among reality TV personalities. He'd also like to keep parts of his private life private, he says, including his current relationship. "The only reason I've said I have a girlfriend was to give her peace of mind, to let it be known that she's mine and I'm hers." To see what else he's willing to share, visit [Cosmopolitan.com/centerfold](https://www.cosmopolitan.com/centerfold). ■



All clothing **Gucci**, watch **Piaget** from **For Future Reference Vintage**.

Opposite page: Jacket and pants **Richard James**, shirt **Banana Republic**, socks **Calzedonia**, shoes **Giuseppe Zanotti**, watch **Piaget** from **For Future Reference Vintage**.

Grooming by Alexandra DiRoma for MAC Cosmetics. Special thanks to New York Rent a Snake.



“Playing a game
and winning
is fun. Anybody
who says that’s
not true is lying.”

—ROB RAUSCH

YOUNG
MIKO WANTS
TO TAKE YOU
HOME





The rap superstar, cosigned by Bad Bunny and Billie Eilish, opens up about breaking into a genre that wasn't built for her.

Photographed by
MAYAN TOLEDANO
Styled by **BRANDON TAN**
Interviewed by
WILLA BENNETT

Bikini **Miu Miu**, boxers and necklace from **The Society Archive**, earrings (worn throughout) and rings **Hiroataka**, necklace (bottom) **Hannah Blount**.

W

hen we arrive at Lala, the restaurant co-owned by Bad Bunny that's tucked into a San Juan, Puerto Rico, mall, we're immediately swarmed by a crowd of 20-somethings in oversized streetwear. I'm pretty sure any of them would kill to interact with Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio. But tonight, judging by their fervid squeals and bandanas under matching bucket hats,¹ they're awaiting someone just as exciting: music phenomenon Young Miko—or “just Miko, please,” as she asks me to call her.

Miko pulls me to a corner table and orders for both of us as her sizable team lingers in another room—the speed and gravity of her ascent means she now requires people.

T-shirt from **The Society Archive**, bikini **Hunza G**, sunglasses **Prada**, necklace Miko's own.



And stealth. As we start talking about Bad Bunny's upcoming Super Bowl halftime performance, I ask her if she plans to attend the game. She says no. Two weeks later, she'd be dancing to Bad Bunny's set next to Pedro Pascal and Cardi B in center frame during one of the most watched television events in American history.

What's remarkable about Miko (born María Victoria Ramírez de Arellano Cardona) isn't just how quickly she's broken out; it's how fully formed she arrived. She careened into the spotlight with her 2021 breakout hit “105 Freestyle.” Within two years, she'd charted on the Billboard Hot 100, opened for Karol G, and joined Bad Bunny onstage. Her debut album, 2024's *Att.*, cracked the top 10 on Billboard's Latin albums chart, and she later opened for Billie Eilish before selling out San Juan's Coliseo de Puerto Rico arena. A Grammy nomination followed, as did collaborations with Central Cee, J Balvin, and Feid. This year, she's fronting Spanish-language campaigns for global brands like Gap.² All of it done as an out queer woman in a corner of the music industry that has historically had no place for her.

That tension is the point: Miko's subversive and sexually fluid lyrics—“Tu jeva que no me llame / Si no, la meto en un trio” (“Your girl better not call me / Otherwise, I'll put her in a threesome”)—slice through a genre built on a very specific mythology: male dominance and heterosexual desire. There are few openly queer artists³ in the worlds of rap, reggaetón and Latin trap, styles she cites as her biggest inspirations. Not that that's held her back. She's known for confidently rapping about sex with women, wearing a Pride flag as a cape onstage, and standing up for trans rights. “Trans women are women. Trans men are men. And nonbinary people are nonbinary,” she says, punctuating every word with her hands.

“I'm literally a gold star lesbian,” she says of her sexuality. On QueerTok, fans memorize her verses, get tattoos inspired by her songs, dissect every candid photograph of her, and speculate about her relationship status. It's a community she wholeheartedly embraces, acknowledging it's done as much for her as she's done for it. “I feel lucky,” she says, “that my queerness has been powerful for my career. I now represent something bigger than me.”

Still, she adds, her most important community is right here. She wants everyone to love Puerto Rico. The restaurant seems to go quiet as she sips her whiskey, telling me about her favorite island gay bars and secluded beaches. She shares stories about her two brothers, Carlos and Juan, and about her mother and father's long and healthy marriage. By the time I leave Puerto Rico a few days later, I've met her dog, Naila, and hung out with her best friend and manager, Mariana (Mari), and I feel like I could pick her many loved ones out of a crowd. Miko is a global artist who has decided that home isn't something she'll ever leave behind. It's a place she brings everyone else into, while revealing parts of herself along the way....

1. A trademark Young Miko style. Tonight, she's wearing baggy Comme des Garçons pants and a cropped shirt by an emerging designer from Spain, AAA Studio. And her alluring smell can be blamed on YSL, she confesses about her fragrance.

2. In March, Young Miko became the first openly queer Latina to star in a Gap ad, for which her song “Wassup” was reworked and retitled “Sweats Like Us.”

3. While Ricky Martin's 2010 coming-out was considered groundbreaking at the time, he'd already achieved global stardom singing about heterosexual love. Most other queer artists in this space operated in the underground neoperreo scene.



"I'M
LITERALLY A
GOLD
STAR
LESBIAN."

Dress
Burberry,
necklace
Don't Let
Disco, ring
Hirotaka.

Swimsuit
and hat
Dsquared2.
boardshorts
Rusty, neck-
laces from
The Society
Archive.

"WHEN
YOU MAKE
ME
LAUGH..."

I'M
LIKE
PUTTY
IN
YOUR
HANDS."

Your mom collected magazines when you were growing up. Did you read *Cosmopolitan*?

I did. And now she's piling up magazines again, but this time it's all the covers I've done. It's really sweet of her.

Before the covers, before your big breakout, you were playing national-level soccer and running a tattoo business. Then you told your parents you wanted to be a musician. How did that go?

They seemed worried. Then I remember my little brother going up to my mom and saying, "Why are you worried? She said she wanted to play soccer, and she made the national team. She said she wanted to tattoo, and she almost owns a studio. Now she wants to make music. She's going to tour the world." You know those memes that are like, "I will succeed because I'm insane"? That's me.

Siblings know you better than anyone. My younger sisters are huge fans of yours. I love that they have someone like you to look up to, since queer artists have been historically overlooked by mainstream labels. How did you avoid that?

Mari, my manager. I've been with her since day one. She quit her corporate job at a dispensary for me. She left, having not managed anyone ever.

TikTok loves your friendship with Mari. What is it about your relationship that translates so clearly to your fans?

We studied together in college, and we played on the same soccer team. That's when I told her my dream was to make music. She knew Angelo⁴ and showed him five freestyles. He agreed that this was special, so we went to Miami and I met his team. A year later, we dropped "105 Freestyle." I remember wanting to throw up because I was so nervous. Then we dropped "Riri" for *Trap Kitty*. That was the year Bad Bunny was doing his shows here in Puerto Rico, and he invited me onstage.

Did he DM you?

He DMed Mari! After that, we knew all this was something.

What do you remember about meeting Bad Bunny?

It was so cool. He'd gone beneath the stage to get some water or change his shirt. I remember hearing, "Miko." I raised my head, and he was standing right in front of me. He seemed like a little kid. He was so excited and said, "Thank you for coming. You're so fire."

The next year, you put out 20 songs and opened stadium shows for Karol G on her *Mañana Será Bonito* Tour. You did all that before releasing your debut album or headlining a single show of your own. How'd you pull that off?

It's why having real people around you is so important. And Benito is so real. Anytime we see each other, he always gives the biggest hugs. He remembers my brothers' names. He'll ask for Mari. He's just a really down-to-earth guy. He's sweet as hell.

You've also opened for Billie Eilish.⁵ What's the difference between Billie's and Bad Bunny's fans?

Benito's fans are intense. I can tell you that. At least here in Puerto Rico, he's loved so much. People really look up to him, and he deserves all the hype. But I feel really close to Billie's fans because I saw them up close and personal for

a bunch of shows. I felt like I really got to see them, what they would wear, and the things they would tag me in online.

Billie said in an interview that she lost more than 100,000 Instagram followers after releasing her first explicitly queer song, "Lunch." Do you think writing about lesbian sex has held you back at all professionally?

Honestly, no. I, honest to god, feel like it's been the other way around. I always knew I was a lesbian. I had my first girlfriend when I was really young. My mom was like, "You're weird around this girl, different than you are around other people." She noticed, and then she just dragged me out of the closet.

I've read that your mother initially struggled with your queerness. I can't imagine how tough that must have been, knowing how close you two are.

My parents tried to take me to church first and to therapy. They thought I was young and confused. We ended up going to therapy together, and I learned that I was perfectly normal. My mom just wanted me to be happy. It's not her fault that she was taught that my queerness wasn't okay. She had to unlearn to learn again. It was a really tedious, delicate moment between my parents and me.

A few years later, my brother came out, and their reaction was completely different from what I went through. They were like, "We love you no matter what. You're always going to be our son. Nothing is going to change that, no matter what you identify as." It was honestly super beautiful to watch them evolve.

Was that healing? I imagine it could have felt complicated, too.

I cried when I saw how my mom reacted. I told her I was proud of her. She cried, too. She said, "Thank you. I hope I'm doing the right thing. I just want you guys to be happy, to find love, and feel the way I feel about your father." I grew up knowing what someone deserves, what love is supposed to look like.

Seeing your parents choose to accept you rather than lose you, what did that teach you about love?

It's honestly really complicated when somebody you care about doesn't support you. But I think love will always win at the end of the day. I was lucky to have parents who decided that their love for me was bigger than anything they didn't understand. But I do have friends who have lost a relationship with their parents, and it's so sad.

How do your parents feel about your songs, especially the more graphic ones?

Obviously, they're the last people I'm thinking of when I'm writing these things. But then we'll be in my car, on our way to grab dinner, and they're like, "Let's listen to it." And I'm like, "Okay, but before I press play, I'm actually so sorry." But no, they're cool. We laugh about it.

When did you have your first kiss?

I was in high school. The way I felt like my soul was leaving my body, I was like, *Oh, bitch, you be gay. You as gay as they come.* I remember feeling the fire, where it's just like a body being on fire. *I never felt this in my life; this is crazy. Is this love?*

4. One of the owners of The Wave Music Group, a label with Capitol Records.

5. About Billie, Miko says, "She's literally just a girl."



Shirt **ERL**, vest **Coach**, bikini top **Christopher John Rogers**, pants **Nili Lotan**, necklace **Hannah Blount**, watch **Hublot**.

What does love look like for you now?

I've dated people where maybe we go to a restaurant and they don't thank the waiter. I'm not saying that literally happened, but you know what I mean. I need someone with empathy around me. Someone who notices those little things the way I do.

When was the last time you were in love?

Not too long ago. And after a breakup, I have to go no-contact. When I love, I love really, really deeply, so going no-contact after a breakup is the only way forward.

What did you love about that person?

When you make me laugh, I'm like putty in your hands. I honestly couldn't care less about how you look. Obviously, there are certain characteristics that catch your eye, but at the end of the day, it's about what you can't see. It's about the things they show through actions, the way they think, the way their heart works, or how they see life. If you laugh, genuinely care, and are smart and intelligent, that's so attractive to me. If you're well-spoken and eloquent, that's fire. That's really attractive.

Do you want to get married?

I think the right person will make me want to be married to them.

Would you say you tend to be monogamous?

It feels more natural for me to be monogamous. It already feels like my life belongs to the world, so I do like to have things that are mine, that belong just to me.

Would you ever date a fan or a person who wasn't famous?

Of course. I don't care if you're famous or not, if you have social media or not or money or not. I don't give a fuck about none of that. That's not what I'm going to see when I wake up and we get into a deep conversation with each other.

But it's scary to date as a famous person. I'll be like, "Does this person genuinely care for me? Are they genuinely interested in knowing me?" I live such a fast-paced life, I don't know where I'm going to be tomorrow. I think I'm here, and then suddenly, it's like, "We just booked this thing in Korea and we have to leave tomorrow."

Is it lonely being single now?

Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's not.

You've been able to make your concerts into events where your fans can feel safe and maybe even less lonely themselves. How do you protect them in those spaces, especially in countries where being openly queer can be dangerous?

I have a segment in my show dedicated to my trans family and friends. I wrote "Protect the Dolls" over the big screen and put a trans woman front and center. And fuck you if you hate that. There have been places we've traveled that have said we can't hang the flags. We have the lesbian flag, the trans flag, we have them all. My team will be like, "So do we still pull out the flags?" And I'm like, "Yeah, we're pulling out the flags!"⁶

Especially right now, it's important to have spaces like your concerts where people can feel safe and seen.

When I was in fourth grade, my dad said to me, "You're not famous yet because nobody has discovered you." He didn't know what he was doing to my brain. He was helping my delusion. But I was like, if my dad thinks I'll be famous and both my parents think I'll be able to make it, how should I give a single fuck about what anybody else thinks? Besides, it's up to us. People like you and me.⁷ We need to make change. ■

6. Miko calls the Pride flag her "superhero cape."

7. She points to me, then to herself, cheering to our matching head-to-toe menswear and queer advocacy.

"I REPRESENT
SOMETHING

BIGGER
THAN
ME."

Shirt Rachel Comey, bikini
top Los Angeles Apparel,
jeans 6397, sandals
Havaianas, necklace from
The Society Archive.

Hair by Christian Alexis.
Makeup by Jonuel Nader Lopez.
Produced by Once : Once.
Shot on location at Hotel
El Convento, available on
Hotels.com. Special thanks to
Vintage Garage PR.

The Year



Dress Ashish.

A close-up portrait of a woman with freckles and light brown hair. A white feather is tucked into her hair near her eye. She is wearing a red and yellow patterned top. The background is a solid grey color.

in Beauty

Cosmopolitan editors tested nearly 2,000 products, tools, and treatments to curate this list. Turn the page for our special summer edit, shot on model Paloma Sandoval, then shop all 370 winners at [Cosmopolitan.com/2026-awards](https://www.cosmopolitan.com/2026-awards).

Photographed by ANAIRAM
Styled by KAIA CARIOLI
Edited by LAUREN BALSAMO



Coat **Issey Miyake**, necklace **Shana Cave**.



Best Oil Cleanser

"I'm usually too tired to do a full double cleanse at the end of the day, but this 2-in-1 makes it easy to get the job done. The gel transforms into a makeup-melting oil as you massage it into your skin, then it becomes a milky wash once you add water."

—LAUREN BALSAMO, BEAUTY DIRECTOR

Neuraé Harmonie The Caring Cleanser, \$115, bloomingdales.com



Best Hydrating Serum

"This is my entire glow-up cheat sheet. It helps keep skin moisturized with hyaluronic acid, and its dose of lactic acid and vitamin C gently exfoliates and brightens."

—JULEE WILSON, BEAUTY EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Clinique Moisture Surge Active Glow Serum, \$49, clinique.com



Best Brightening Eye Cream

"As someone with stubborn dark circles, I love that this ginseng- and caffeine-packed eye cream makes me look wide-awake—so much so that concealer is now something optional, not necessary, most mornings."

—JASMINE HYMAN, ASSISTANT BEAUTY EDITOR

Erborian Skin Therapy Eye, \$39, usa.erborian.com



Best Plumping Moisturizer

"After I tried this cream for a week, someone literally called my face 'juicy,' and now I'm a devoted daily user. The combo of hydrating hyaluronic acid and soothing ectoin makes my 30-something skin look as plump as a newborn baby's."

—LB

La Roche-Posay Hyalu B5 Suracti-vated Cream, \$40, laroche-posay.us



Best Calming Face Mist

"A spritz of this creamy mist feels super refreshing *and* is a lifesaver when my skin is irritated. It's full of soothing ingredients that instantly take down redness and inflammation."

—BETH GILLETTE, BEAUTY EDITOR

Dr. Althea 345 Relief Cream Mist, \$20, ulta.com



Best Moisturizing Body Wash

"If you want to elevate your shower, do yourself a favor and invest in this luxe body wash. It comes in a bunch of amazing scents, lathers really nicely, and keeps skin noticeably moisturized."

—JH

Josie Maran Hydrating Argan Body Wash, \$22, sephora.com



Best Body Oil

"I'm a body oil snob, and this is at the top of my short list of favorites. It's both an indulgence and a functional treatment. My skin always looks glowy and feels ultra soft after using it."

—JW

Uni Golden Microalgae Body Oil, \$48, weareuni.com



Best Matte Foundation

"The buildable coverage from this foundation works so well at blurring and smoothing that an aesthetician couldn't tell I was dealing with a chin full of breakouts when I showed up to a recent facial appointment."

—BG

Dior Forever Skin Wear Foundation, \$60, dior.com



Best Volumizing Mascara

"If this mascara is good enough for our cover star, it's good enough for me. Seriously, it makes my typically sparse lashes look plush and full, and the curved brush is incredible for adding long-lasting lift and curl."

—LB

Lancôme Lash Idôle Curl Goddess Mascara, \$30, lancome-usa.com



Best Cream Eyeshadow

"I strictly stick to cream shadows for simple swipe-and-go eye makeup and this is one of the best options I've tried. The buildable pigments, sparkly sheen, and crease-proof finish are what you'd typically expect from a luxury formula."

—JH

Maybelline New York Shadow Drip Eye Tint, \$9, ulta.com



Best Waterproof Eyeliner

"Makeup artist Hung Vanngo absolutely nailed this liner. I love a smudgy, lived-in look and this pencil is perfect for creating that and making it last from early-morning meetings to late-night parties. I'm obsessed."

—SAMANTHA OLSON, ASSISTANT NEWS EDITOR

Hung Vanngo Beauty Longwear Eyeliner, \$24, sephora.com



Best Powder Blush

"From the bright shades to the graphic packaging and the pillowy texture, everything about this is simply joyous. The way it gives my cheeks a luminous, long-lasting flush is just the cherry on top."

—LB

Glossier Cloud Paint Plush Blush, \$26, glossier.com



Best Matte Lipstick

"I dab this on with my fingers, then blur the edges so it looks like I just kissed some of it off. And unlike so many matte products, it's zero percent drying—just chic as hell."

—BG

MAC Cosmetics Powder Kiss Hazy Matte Lipstick, \$27, maccosmetics.com





Dress **Erdem** from
Net-a-Porter.

Opposite page:
Dress **Batsheva**,
ring **Selim**
Mouzannar.

Hair by Akihisa
Yamaguchi for
Oribe. Makeup by
Mical Klip for MAC
Cosmetics. Mani-
cure by Mei at Red
Represents.



Best Dry Shampoo

"I struggled to extend time between wash days until I discovered this dry shampoo. It absorbs oil without making my hair stringy and is housed in a chic refillable jar alongside a brush for precise application."

—JH

Crown Affair The Dry Shampoo, \$48, [sephora.com](https://www.sephora.com)



Best Hair Wand

"I'm the queen of frizz, and this is exactly how I plan on keeping my hair sleek all summer long. I use it on my part to flatten flyaways post-blowout or to smooth fuzzies when I'm wearing a slick updo. I also love the oversized wand for quickly covering large areas."

—LB

IGK Good Behavior Hair Taming Wand, \$24, [igkhair.com](https://www.igkhair.com)



Best Styling Cream

"This does it all: smooths, adds shine, protects from heat, and provides soft, flexible hold. No matter the style I'm going for, this is the first product I use on damp hair post-wash."

—LB

Gisou Honey Milk 5-in-1 Styling Cream, \$29, [sephora.com](https://www.sephora.com)



Best Blow-Dry Brush

"I'm currently in a codependent relationship with this brush. Its bristles are grippy (yet gentle) and the cooling setting is a game changer for locking in a style. When I give myself a blowout, I get volume and bounce that lasts all day."

—SABRINA TOTO,
VISUAL EDITOR

L'ange Le Volume, \$69, [langehair.com](https://www.langehair.com)



Best Press-On Nails

"I can stick a set of these on and trust that they'll stay put for a full seven days. Even better? They come in a slew of designs and lengths—even micro for very short nails."

—BG

Quickies Press-On Nails, \$22, [getquickies.com](https://www.getquickies.com)



Best Longwear Nail Polish

"The vibe here is a salon-quality, gel-like manicure that doesn't require getting off your couch (or compromising the health of your nails)."

—JW

Chillhouse Forever Wear Chill Paint, \$12, [chillhouse.com](https://www.chillhouse.com)



Best Body Spray

"When I want to smell like a fancy spa (or a rich person who frequents a fancy spa), I immediately spritz myself from head to toe with this woody, herbal mist."

—BG

Odele Hair + Body Mist, \$17, [ulta.com](https://www.ulta.com)



Dress and wings stylist's
own, bra **Savage X Fenty**.

Our vision boards are finally
giving way to something new:
waist-length hair, as seen
here on model Vivian Wilson.

Photographed and styled by NATALIE TAUGER
Written by LAUREN BALSAMO

Great Lengths



Get Growing

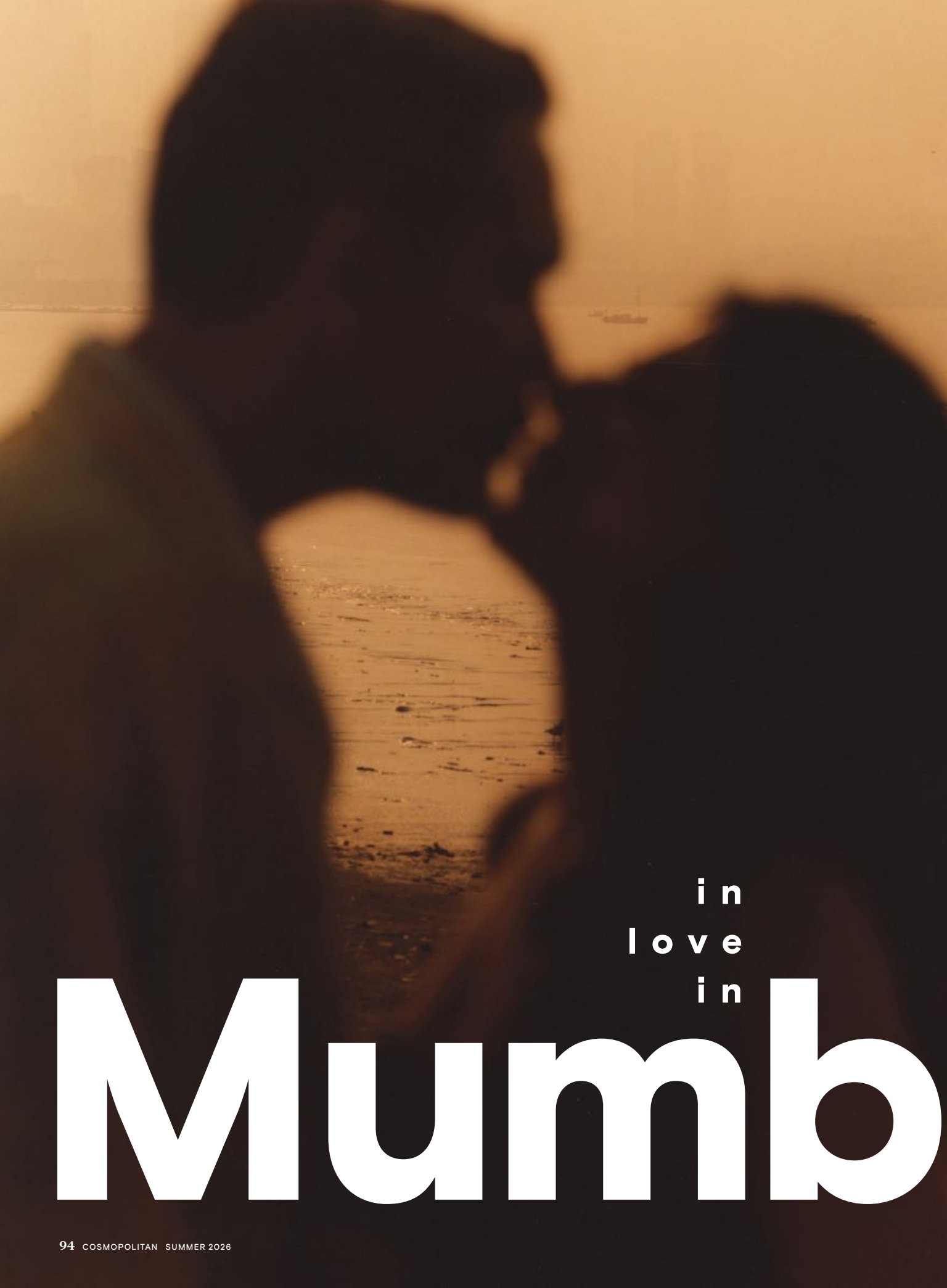
Nourishment is a prerequisite for long hair. "Using a mask with hydrating and strengthening ingredients once or twice a week is key," says hairstylist Rogério Cavalcante, founder of Brazil Edition haircare. Also important are regular trims (split ends make hair look shorter) and being mindful about exposure to heat.

From top: Dress and hat **Dior**, shoes **Sandy Liang**, mask **Fleur du Mal**. Top **Issey Miyake**, swimsuit **Dead Lotus Couture**.

Opposite page: Dress **Dead Lotus Couture**.

Hair by Ginger Leigh Ryan for R+Co. Makeup by Chloe Grae for MAC Cosmetics.





in
love
in

Mumb



Romance and chemistry look different in every relationship, in every city, in every country. For the 11th installment of our Cosmo Couples series, in which we travel the world photographing real-life partners, we touched down in Mumbai to speak to five pairs about what makes their love work.

Photographed by KEERTHANA KUNNATH
Interviewed by SNIGDHA AHUJA

Prateek + Aakriti

MEDIA SALES AND
MARKETING EXECUTIVE, 39 +
DIRECTOR-PRODUCER, 37

Years together: 9

AAKRITI: On our last holiday to Osaka, we found ourselves in a vinyl bar the size of a storeroom, listening to a retired rocker turned bartender playing *ghazels*.

PRATEEK: The night ended with him cracking open the only bottle of Indian whiskey he kept among his Japanese malts.

AAKRITI: And pouring us a round...

PRATEEK: ...while the entire bar listened to Jagjit Singh.

ai



Chaitanya + Shweta

MUSICIAN-ACTOR, 35 +
ACTOR, 40

Years together: 13

CHAITANYA: If our relationship had a movie title, it would be *Kya Mast Hai Life* (*Life Is Awesome*).

SHWETA: Or *Koi Mil Gaya* (*I Met the One*).

CHAITANYA: To be honest, I think love exists in the silent moments. We are old-school—we still leave notes for each other.

SHWETA: We just fit. He is my favorite person to do everything with.

Prayag + Porus

STYLIST AND CREATIVE
DIRECTOR, 38 +
PHOTOGRAPHER AND
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, 40

Years together: 20

PRAYAG: We met online. I used to write a blog about my everyday life. Porus became a regular commenter and reader.

PORUS: We found talking to each other very comfortable.

PRAYAG: That's how we became friends.

PORUS: Just having that closeness—I had never had that with another man.

PRAYAG: It felt very safe.



Sheldon + Meagan

PHOTOGRAPHER, 32 +
STYLIST, 33

Years together: 5

MEAGAN: A silent way he expresses his love is by listening to me and showing up for me. Picking me up from the airport without me asking.

SHELDON: For me, it's her taking care of me on busy days and making sure I've eaten.

MEAGAN: And then there are moves we make to win an argument—I make a sad puppy face.

SHELDON: I never win an argument.



A full-page photograph of a couple walking in a narrow alleyway. The woman is on the left, wearing a dark, patterned, sleeveless dress and white sneakers. The man is on the right, wearing a green and black checkered shirt and dark trousers. They are walking towards the camera. The background is a yellow building with a large, ornate wooden lattice window. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The overall mood is romantic and intimate.

Prernaa + Rohan

DESIGN BRAND FOUNDER AND
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, 37 +
CREATIVE STUDIO FOUNDER
AND VISUAL ARTIST, 36

Years together: 4

PRERNA: My love language has always been touch. It could just be our eyes meeting. Any type of intimacy.

ROHAN: No matter how busy we are, we at least have one meal together. Also, I have to say this...

PRERNA: What?

ROHAN: I think she chose me because of my morning chai.

PRERNA: Oh, yes, he makes the best chai.



IDENTITY MARKERS

Three writers meditate on gender as the rules get stricter and the definitions get looser.

Illustrations by KHADIJA HORTON

It's hard to imagine a time when the stakes have been higher or the divisions deeper. During his two presidencies, Donald Trump has challenged gender identity protections in schools and health care, banned transgender people from the military, and signed an executive order recognizing "male" and "female" as the only acceptable gender identities. The simultaneous rise of the MAGA-supported tradwife movement, popularized by influencers like Hannah Neeleman and now tens of millions of social media followers strong, has made throwback womanhood both a mainstream aesthetic and a lucrative business.

In many ways, this has all been a reaction to an unprecedented cultural expansion of gender expression, in which social media and dating apps offer up to 50 gender options, stars like Harry Styles step out in dresses, and series like *Pose* and *Euphoria* advance the idea of gender as a spectrum—or as something that need not be defined at all.

So where does this leave people who are either firmly rooted in their gender identity or still working out what that means? The answer is deeply personal.

Womanhood Is More Fraught Than Ever—But I'm Still Obsessed With It

By SOPHIE KEMP

A loud restaurant. Uptown. East side. The waiters are all wearing tuxes. We order a bottle. I'm in a black dress, skintight, very short. Lamé blazer, a runway piece that debuted when I was still a child. He's in his suit. He tops off my glass. The walls are all wood, with hanging paintings of Italian farmhouses. We are seated at a square bistro table with bentwood chairs.

This happened when I was 28 years old, in the absurdly early stages of a relationship. The women around me all have their skin pulled back. They are fawning over their husbands. They are drinking white wine and crossing their legs. They are reapplying their makeup, checking their appearances in their compact mirrors. Our waiter takes our order. "You're in the middle of the action," he says. "Best table!"

This is a moment from the recent past where I have felt the most like a girl, a girlfriend. A girl in a sea of girls.

It was never obvious to me how one is supposed to be a girl, in the classic sense. As a child—I think I was 4 years old—I would sit on the sink of my grandmother's bathroom. "You apply the foundation first," she'd say, "and after that comes the blush!" She did it on herself, showing me how she blended it. Then she'd do it on me. "Beautiful," she'd say. "So beautiful!"

My grandmother was a woman who, in the mid-century, did all of her shopping in a

Celine suit. My grandmother was someone who once drove her cherry-red Triumph at a speed that led to its inevitable destruction. It quite literally burst into flames. As a child, I thought being a girl was being just like her—a little blush, a little foundation. You do the shopping in your sports car and your suit. You wait for your husband at home.

I tried to shape myself in her image. I wore calico sundresses and patent leather Mary Jane shoes. My hair was cut into a bob by a woman who did it in her garage to the tune of pop music. She held up photos of Katie Holmes printed in tabloid magazines and said to me, "This is who you look like, girl!" I told the ladies at school my dream was to be a professional rock climber, a summer camp counselor, or a novelist, in order of preference. I thought about being a girl in black-and-white terms, as I suppose many young girls do. There was a set of rules, girl dogma, that made it simpler for me: A girl wears a dress. She coats her lips in something sweet. She crosses her legs. Her bicycle is pink and it has blue and purple tassels at the end. She picks a boy and that boy is her main priority.

In the years after my childhood, I dabbled in all of the usual rebellions. I shaved different parts of my head. I bleached my hair blonde and dyed my bangs pink. I threw my body into amplifiers at punk shows. I got so stoned, I passed out in a supermarket on the outskirts of the idyllic small town where I attended college. I crashed my car, with a girl I had a crush on sitting in the passenger seat. We were both fine. I got kicked out of



I watched myself being a girlfriend, like I was watching myself on a stage.

at least three different bars in Paris, France. A boy fingered me on a park bench in a heavily trafficked part of Brussels, while it was raining. A few months after college, I sold raffle tickets at an auction for a charity, and at the end of the night, a man 10 years my senior asked me to follow him outside. He pulled my hair so hard, my scalp hurt the next day. I told myself I wanted this. I told myself I wanted all of this. This was an era when I thought I was living my life in such a pure and different way. That I had distanced myself from the rigidity of being a girl by living such an interesting and fucked-up life. But then something changed.

Culturally, we are living in a girl moment. And now that I'm an adult, there's something especially seductive about the rigidity of being a girl. It feels very scientific again. It feels good to lean into the artificiality of it all. To be a little bit plastic. Right now, it doesn't seem so bad to be like Addison Rae, singing about boys and money and clothes. Or Sabrina Carpenter, who is getting her hair pulled by a man in a suit on the cover of her new album. It doesn't seem so bad to be so sweet. To opt for an extremist hetero-optimism instead of its inverse.

And I don't think it sets women back to play the role of the blonde in the headlights, the perfect girlfriend. In fact, I'm frustrated by the idea that it even has to be subversive. I'll grant that it's a little controversial, in a moment where it is so particularly fraught to be assigned female at birth. Why does it have to be?

The key, I think, is self-awareness. To feel like you have autonomy over what you're

doing. That there is something fun about being a little bit retrograde. It makes me feel like I'm in a video game to play the role of girl, girlfriend, whatever. It can be like this: Girl gets all prim and proper. Girl removes the necessary body hair. Girl puts on the necessary frock. Girl intuitively knows what her man wants. Girl is what her man wants.

What I'm trying to say is you have to know what you're doing and why you're doing it. What I'm trying to say is that women sometimes want this in a way that isn't pathological.

At least for me, exploring the aesthetics of rigid femininity came in a period when I started to become more confident. Being a girl felt less threatening to me. It started to feel fun. It became my favorite game. It didn't feel like something I needed to rebel against, at least not actively. I was entering an intense creative period. I was starting to become successful for making art. I wrote a novel about a girl who is so good at playing the part of girlfriend that she straight up gets dumped. I no longer had the impulse to shave different parts of my head. I became interested in the idea of dressing in a way that was appealing to men. I became interested in being in romantic relationships that weren't mutually destructive, relationships that were happy.

But while being a self-aware girl can be fun, you can still really get hurt. It can still be scary, scary, scary. And that's the risk you're going to run. I'm saying this because I've gotten really hurt, and I knew exactly what I was doing when I got hurt. (People—and girls—with agency still get hurt.) There was something that happened to me recently. It happened with the man from the restaurant with the bentwood chairs. In our relationship, I played the part of girl and I think it might have been the best performance of my career yet. And by this I mean I watched myself being a girlfriend, like I was watching myself on a stage. In a black box of a theater. I was kind and pretty and sweet. I was almost never myself, and I knew exactly what I was doing. I let myself become diminutive. I let my thoughts slow down, and I let myself become more soft-spoken.

I consented to all of it and I had agency in everything. I was a perfect little hologram. I don't regret anything. Because that's my favorite thing about playing girl: allowing yourself to love and be loved by men and seeing what the fuck happens. Letting yourself roll the dice. To be like Helen and wait at the walls of Troy. That is what it means to play girl. That is the trickiest part of the whole charade. Allowing someone else into that fantasy, knowing that you might get really, really hurt. And then knowing that afterward, you're going to be okay. Because you will be. Because you already are.

SOPHIE KEMP is the author of the novel *Paradise Logic*. She lives in Brooklyn.



Identifying as Nonbinary Meant Becoming the Thing I Feared Most

By RIVER L. RAMIREZ

Recently, my family came to visit me in Philadelphia. My cousin, a classic Puerto Rican papi who lives in Miami, took me out to drink near my new apartment. Over beers, I told him about a recent date I had with someone from the apps. At the end of the date, I had done something out of character and announced, "You will pay the bill." To my surprise, it worked. They picked up the \$70 tab.

I'd spent the past year going on shitty dates, politely listening to boring stories about people's exes and then splitting the bill. I'd wanted to be considerate, even if I wasn't feeling the spark. Sometimes, I'd spend more time than I wanted to spend with the date, just trying to find something to like about them. Could I at least see this stranger as a friend? Could I convince myself this hadn't been a waste of time?

It never ended well. One person told me they'd recently bought a rabbit to sacrifice in a ritual. A Reiki healer turned out to be a chain-smoker. A grad student said she fists all of her friends. It all culminated in good stories but zero sparks.

My cousin listened and then looked at me with the intensity of Morpheus in *The Matrix*. "Become what you fear most," he said, and then he told me a story about trying

to hook up with a woman when he was a bachelor. He said he'd put his finger in her mouth—and it had worked. "Ewwwww, dude," I replied. (My cousin had once tried to teach me how to be a "player" and I had ended up crying. I hate negging and pickup artists.) But...maybe there was some wisdom here. When I'd told that date to pay the check, I'd been embracing a persona that scared me. And that, I think, was my cousin's point.

All my life, I've been afraid to be perceived the wrong way. I would hide aspects of myself to appear more "civilized"—less poor, less Black, less Indigenous, less Latin. I was scared of being seen as stereotypically marginalized. After more than one white woman who self-identified as a life coach told me I looked like "an Incan princess," I became so worried about being perceived as a "healer" by white people that I never wore the color purple. In my mind, if I wore purple silk, I might as well have been showing up as an ayahuasca shaman with a talking snake.

What scared me the most was my father. I feared becoming him: someone so full of rage that he could snap into violence at a moment's notice. So I suppressed all of my anger. I joked that I could forgive anyone for anything. I let men who were my "friends" grope me, and I looked the other way because they were drunk. I let partners yell at me and put me in danger. I vowed

**I want to be loved
in my strangeness
and my rage, as the
boy and the woman.**

that no matter how provoked I became, I'd never become like my father. I told myself to let it go. I thought this was noble, but it wasn't. It was repression and fear of expressing my own monstrous anger. I had swallowed that anger and it was eating me alive—I developed searing neck pain and a spine disease.

Still, I associated masculinity with avoidance and violence, and so I feared my own expression of it. But this year, a little boy appeared in my dreams alongside a hypersexualized woman. In my sleep, I saw



them in a hammock, their skin melting together David Cronenberg-style. I saw the boy watching me from the shadows, running from would-be killers who'd shot him in the neck. The pain made the boy run faster. I could feel his strength.

This was my androgyny crying out to me. My soul screaming that I am more than my perceived biology dictates. I am androgynous and nonbinary, and I reside in the middle. I am the woman—soft, patient, and allowing. And I am the boy—injured, crying out to be seen. And I have been harmed by the way my body has been consumed and used and overlooked. I can now be angry.

Demanding that my lackluster date pay the bill wasn't nice, but it was a small way of clawing back my power. All this self-restraint wasn't doing me or anyone else any good. As my cousin urged, I had to become what I feared. And my dreams helped me realize my deepest fear: that if someone really saw what I came from—the abuse, the hurt, the rage—it would be too ugly. Too hard to love.

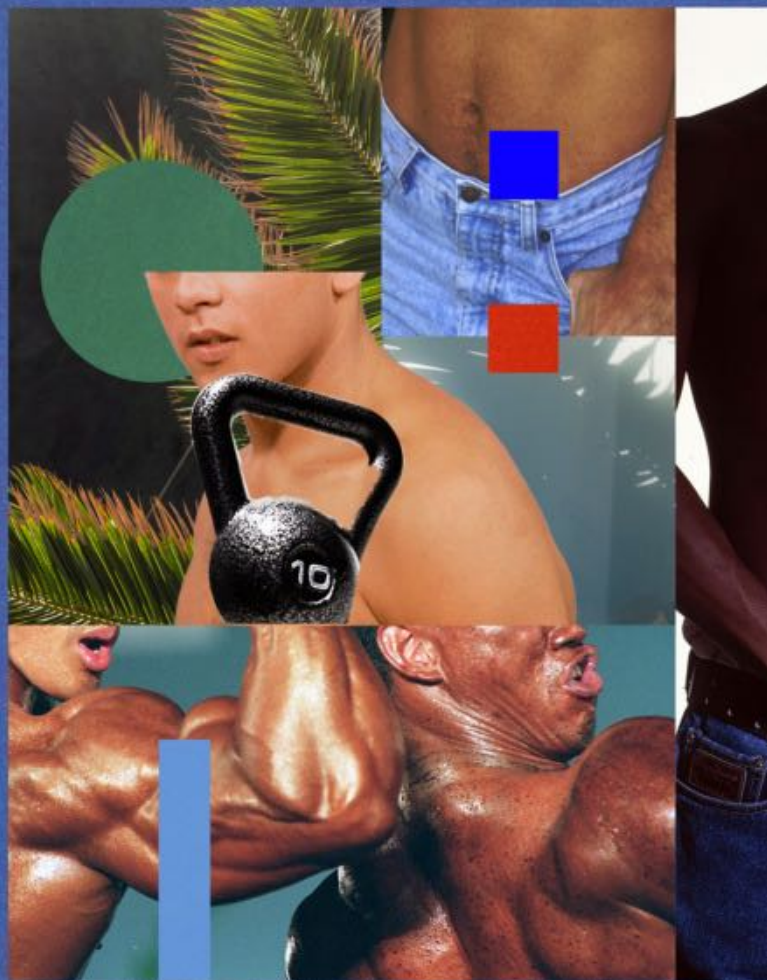
But there's a difference between wanting to be loved and wanting to be loved as your authentic self. I want to be loved in my strangeness and my rage. As the boy and the hypersexualized woman. So I've begun to express my anger by being a little more honest with those around me, letting my voice get stronger, saying things like, "I don't like that!"

It's disturbing that showing anger or disgust makes people respect you. I hate that this is so. And I hate it more that I didn't do it sooner.

Now, as my self-acceptance grows, I receive compliments that make my heart flutter. I've heard that I'm "beautiful and handsome." When I asked an older female friend to define my vibe, she said, "You look like a girl who wants to be a boy." My family members use my chosen name (sometimes, but it's a start). I've started sitting with my legs open, something I haven't done since going to etiquette school as a child. This feels like a path toward my liberation.

I'm working to become a healthy version of what I feared the most. The boy in me is feeling safe enough to emerge. Now, he walks with me in dreams. I see his blue shadow and feel rage at his silenced voice. He helps me look at my cousin, my father, the men in my family and see the little boy in them. The beautiful little boy who screamed for help but was never safe enough to be soft. And me, who had to pretend to be submissive and is just now learning to show my strength.

RIVER L. RAMIREZ is a writer and the author of 7, a collection of short stories, poems, and drawings. They live in a Victorian house in West Philadelphia with their black cat.



What I Learned About Masculinity From Shirtless Trans Guys on the Internet

By TEENY CHIRICHILLO

It's been a long time since I saw someone shirtless on my For You Page who didn't have top surgery scars. The algorithm has me figured out. My feeds are flooded with transmasculine people—those who probably wouldn't think of themselves as influencers but who influence my understanding of my place in this world on a daily basis and those who self-identify as influencers and make their living posting intimate details of their lives. I scroll through it all: how to dress more masculine at your first corporate job, how to masculinize your chest pre-top surgery, how to just be, feel, and look more masculine.

My earliest sense of manhood came from watching grown men on reality TV in the early 2000s. I envied their freedom and their confident playfulness the same way I envied the boys in my class whose punch lines got more laughs than the girls who whispered their jokes. I looked at these men's made-for-TV abs, nipple piercings, and funky hairstyles and felt a kinship with them. Because I was a kid and they were adults, the rift between our identities was rooted in age rather than the fact that I was born in a girl's body. In my mind, I was going to grow up and look like them, be like them.



So it was only natural that four years ago, when I became interested in working out, I sought out tutorials from ripped trans guys. The most notable were Alxye and Grayson. For years, they'd documented their fitness and gender transformations and offered virtual personal training programs. Like many trans influencers, they were open about their hormone and top surgery journeys. And when they shared chest and shoulder exercises, their 500,000+ combined followers and I got an up-close look at the way trans men's bodies change when following a consistent diet and disciplined routine (by this point, I'd also seen countless videos of ground beef slop).

The muscles on these two frequently posting TikTokers seemed to get more defined by the day. Although they were younger than me, I looked up to them, experiencing the same hopefulness that the goofy, shirtless male contestants on *Big Brother* or *Survivor* had inspired. That could be me. If I now have any muscle mass or definition, it's thanks to videos of theirs I had bookmarked.

Being transgender takes an immense amount of self-knowledge and courage, but it doesn't automatically liberate us from superficiality or aesthetic ideals, from the social pressure to be hot. These days, I'm more aware of my body than ever, because my appearance is as close as it's ever been to matching how I feel inside—and because I wish it matched so much more. For two years, I bound my chest and was hyperaware of how clothing fit and whether it exposed the fact that I had boobs. Now, I measure the concavity of my chest against other top surgery results. Even though the boobs are gone, I still obsessively check to see if my shirts are falling perfectly flat.

When I watch Alxye and Grayson now, I feel isolated on a confusing island, somewhere between extreme validation, inferiority, and envy. While I appreciate the muscle mass they've helped me gain, I also find myself playing a comparison game when I see them shirtless and flexing. I wonder if their discipline makes them more manly. Does the fact that their shoulders are wider than their hips help them to pass better than me? Is this even the kind of "manly" I want to look like or am I just seeing what's possible for trans guys and feeling pressure to measure up?

Body comparison online isn't a new phenomenon, but it's a dangerous game and one that I find myself playing more frequently in this intermediate stage of my transition. As I grow more comfortable expressing masculinity, I become more aware of its toxic constraints. In my feed, sandwiched between Alxye's and Grayson's thirst traps and workout splits, are valid criticisms from other trans creators over the high price of their training programs. And sandwiched between those are people wondering when being transmasculine turned into a bodybuilding competition or sending a callout for more fat butch and transmasculine people to post their outfits, their thirst traps, their daily lives.

The story of the differences between my on- and offline realities is the story of my relationship to my own masculinity. YouTube videos taught me how to give myself an intramuscular injection of testosterone and showed me hundreds (maybe thousands) of trans guys masculinizing—their voices deepening, their faces and chests growing hair, their skincare regimens for fighting testosterone-induced acne, their fat redistribution timelines. Online, all of these guys served me a little slice of practical transitioning tips, and they came together to form this ooey-gooey warm pie of belonging.

Now, the challenging part is finding that sense of shared male experience outside of the digital butch potluck. I never get to see the outer worlds of my online mentors

and guides. If, how, and when they started to pass after transitioning. How they handle being misgendered. The exact moment when the women's room started to feel off-limits. Unlike their muscle mass or gains, those are the parts we have to face privately, and those are the matters I find myself monitoring like a madman today.

For the past couple of months, I've been back to the old reliable job of serving tables, a gig where having interactions with strangers is just about the only consistent part of each day. More frequently than ever before, I'm being addressed as "sir." But tables often recognize me as a *Survivor* contestant and, without fail, some group will refer to me with she/her pronouns.

Outside my pocket-size world of queerness and transness, all I've got is my own self-presentation, and how I'm perceived is impossible to predict or control. My job gives me an up-close view of whether I am—or not—passing as male.

When people see me as a man, I'm less insecure about how my weight fluctuates and that makes me more motivated to take care of my body. I got top surgery and

Being transgender doesn't liberate us from the social pressure to be hot.

started hormones for my own sanity, and as inner peace starts to feel within reach, I wonder, *Is this what cisgender people feel like? Able to make health choices with a sense of hope and possibility?*

I still have days when dysphoria persists when I try on jeans or slouch when shirtless, but I also have days when the wind blows my shirt against my chest while riding my bike and I feel male in body and mind. I'm finding solace in the fact that while what I'm describing is shrouded in both the experience of transitioning and the daily plight of male beauty standards, it is more than anything the experience of being human. And being human in 2026, for many of us, means existing in both physical and virtual spaces. Learning how to make sense of my online world has been more emotionally fraught than the 25 days I spent in Fiji during the taping of *Survivor*. I don't know how my understanding of masculinity will evolve and grow, but I'm grateful that—online and off—I've found spaces where my identity is mirrored, challenged, and validated. ■

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Dig deeper into all things gender right here.



Cosmopolitan and Sourcebooks have partnered up on an exciting book imprint: Cosmo Reads. Get ready to discover all your new favorite books at CosmoReads.com.



Michelle S.





The Last Time We Drowned

A Cosmo Reads book
by SARATOGA SCHAEFER

Saratoga Schaefer's debut psychological thriller, *Serial Killer Support Group*, was a twisted, can't-put-it-down experience. The author's upcoming Cosmo Reads release, *The Last Time We Drowned*, doubles down on the mind games and mystery as it follows protagonist Charlie Engles, who seems to win the chance of a lifetime: a spot on the *Empress*, an influencer-only yacht that just a special few get invited to experience. With dark secrets chasing her, Charlie sees this as the perfect escape. But not even being at sea can keep her safe....



T

he heat is so wet and oppressive I can taste it on my lips. It's the flavor of mildew and damp bathing suits. Beads of moisture line the back of my neck and the inside of my waistband.

Even my earlobes are damp.

The plastic cup that holds my iced coffee is warped and soft, as if it, too, is melting. Condensation glitters on its surface. I can relate. I'm not even moving and I'm sweating. There's heat in my lungs, my rib cage, and the lining of my stomach, a heavy presence that settles like the spray from fumigation. It's the kind of soggy, uncomfortable humidity that reminds me of a damp towel.

I spent two hours carefully picking out an outfit, trying to do my makeup, and attempting to style my pixie cut so that it didn't look flat, only for it all to be ruined by the muggy air fifteen seconds after I got off the bus. Coming from Wisconsin in November, I thought the Florida temperatures would be a relief, but this is worse than the cold. It's so swampy here that by the time I pulled my bag out from underneath the bus, my short-sleeved button-up top was already showing pit stains, and strands of hair were sticking to my forehead.

I walked thirty-five minutes from the bus depot to get to the café, sweat running in rivulets down my back. My duffel bag dug into my shoulder, leaving a welt on my skin. By the time I slunk through the door of the café, I was sure I had destroyed any dignity I had left. I grabbed a high-top table, ordered an iced coffee the color of sand, and thought about bailing on the interview entirely.

But I came all this way. Besides, I don't want to move. I'm pretty sure if I walk back outside now, there will be nothing left of me except a sweat slick on the sidewalk.

I run a finger down the side of the cup, swiping away condensation droplets, enjoying the brief chill.

The café where I'm supposed to meet Vivienne Rockland isn't air-conditioned, but it has an astounding view of the undulating turquoise waves of the Florida Bay.

The smell of the ocean pours in from the open windows, suppressing the musk of coffee beans. Salt overpowers the air as I sip my drink.

Florida is the worst, I think as I stare at my six-dollar coffee, trying not to ruminate on the fact that between the flight from Milwaukee to Miami and the bus ticket from Miami to the Keys, my bank account is only a few dollars above double digits.

"Oh!" An involuntary gasp comes from a young woman two tables away. Her face is buried in a book, and as my eyes snag on the familiar shiny blue cover, my stomach cramps.

A different kind of sweat collects along my temples and between my breasts: it's cold and clammy. I can't see the entire cover from this angle, but I don't need to. I know it. It's seared in my brain for all of eternity—the metallic cerulean scales, the elegant typeface of the title. The name stamped at the bottom, big and proud.

The woman reading draws the book even closer to her face, and her cheeks grow pinker and pinker. She must have gotten to the sex scene everyone on TikTok keeps talking about. Before *A Song of Scales and Salt* was published, everyone wondered about the mechanics of the promised

steamy romance—how do mermaids fuck anyway? Fish sex isn't very hot; it's mostly the female expelling eggs into the water so the male can fertilize them. But the biggest new romantasy delivered. People couldn't shut up about it. And I couldn't escape it.

I get up, adjusting my seat so the woman and the book are no longer in my sight line.

Pulling out a compact mirror, I try to adjust my hair so it looks less wet as I wait for my heart rate to go down.

Don't think about it. Everything is fine. Concentrate on the matter at hand.

At least my mascara isn't running. I usually wear minimal makeup, but I've seen the girl I'm supposed to meet—she's always in full glam, so I painted my face a little more than usual today.

I check the time. I got here early, but at this point, Vivienne Rockland is very late.

As I unlock my phone, a notification pops up: "You have a new memory!" It's a selection of photos from last year. Sage and I with our faces pressed together, sticking our tongues

out for the camera. A portrait of Sage on her boat, hair whipping in the wind, Lake Michigan glimmering in the background. Her laptop resting on her knees. One final shot of our notebooks side by side on a coffee table, pens askew next to them. It was one of our final writing sessions, during which I jotted down haphazard quotes and Sage scribbled furiously, refusing to show me her work, saying it wasn't ready yet.

My stomach churns as my hands get hot. Why does it seem like our phones are programmed

to show us the most painful memories in our camera roll?

I want to delete the photos of Sage, but I am torn. They're all I have left of her. And the memories won't be deleted. I know—I've tried.

Stop this. I tear myself away from the photos, hastily dabbing at my lower eyelids in case I messed up my makeup.

Where's Vivienne Rockland?

I tap through my phone, overanalyzing her last email to me with the location and time of our interview, trying to psych myself up to send her a check-in, when the air in the café changes. The spark of lightning before a storm.

When I look up, there she is.

Vivienne Rockland is shorter than I expected, and her face is rounder than it appears in all her photos, but otherwise she looks the same as she does on her social media: shiny black hair, heavily made-up face, perfectly drawn-on eyebrows, and a pert little nose.

Spotting me right away, Vivienne rushes over to my table, ignoring the double takes from the other café guests as she moves through the space like she owns it. It's not that she's a recognizable influencer with well over a million followers; it's not the immaculate plastic surgery that accentuates her chest and ass; it's not the neon-orange athleisure set she's wearing—it's her energy. It radiates off her in waves.

"Oh my God, hi! I'm so embarrassed!" she says as she slides into the chair opposite me, eyes flickering as she takes in my muddled appearance, shabby duffel bag, and half-drunk coffee. "I'm never late. Our usual captain got sick, so the ride from Ligia to Islamorada was super delayed. I

I get the sense she knows people are watching her. There's something about her that is... performative.



hope you weren't waiting long." Her voice is pitchy and breathless, but I know from watching her videos that her cadence isn't from rushing—this is how she talks.

"No worries! I haven't been waiting long," I lie, trying to match her energy, infusing sunbeams into my voice. "It's nice to meet you!"

How is she so dry? She doesn't seem to be affected by the heat or humidity at all. Her makeup is perfect, her hair is floaty and thick. The stares of other customers, especially the men, waft around her. Vivienne flips a curtain of hair back from her face and giggles. I inhale a wave of flowery perfume from her hair products as her locks fall back down on her shoulders.

"It's so amazing to meet you, Charlie! Or should I call you @ChaptersWithCharlie?" She winks.

Please don't, I want to say. Instead, I smile and say, "Charlie is fine. Do you want a drink or something?"

"I'm okay for now," Vivienne says, crossing her arms and leaning over the high-top table so that her cleavage presses together.

I get the sense she knows people are watching her. There's something about her that is...performative. But I don't care. I don't care if she strips naked and does cartwheels; this is my only viable option. I need this job, as nontraditional as it might be.

"Well, I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity, Vivienne. It really means a lot."

"Oh my God, please, call me Viv.

And it's no problem. Don't even think of this as a formal job interview. We're gonna chat, get to know each other, 'kay?"

Bullshit. This is the Big One, the most important interview of my life.

As if she can read my thoughts, Viv says, "I won't waste any more of your time, so let's get started! First off, why do you want this position? I know we chatted a little on our Zoom call about you wanting to expand your audience and reach new demographics, but c'mon. Give me the real reason." She waggles her brows at me and leans forward.

"Well, I feel like what all of you are doing on *Empress* is a unique opportunity to leverage my personal brand and get to the next level," I say, reciting the carefully scripted answer I drafted on the plane ride to Florida. "I mean, it's brilliant too. A yacht full of influencers with various niches living together, promoting their brands? It's like reality TV, except it has the potential to be beneficial. I think my focus on literature and helping people prioritize reading could be beneficial to us both."

You used the word "beneficial" twice, you moron, I chastise myself. This is why you're not a writer.

Viv grins and then opens her mouth wide, pretending to yawn. She splays her perfectly manicured hands on the high-top and licks the corner of her lip. "Firstly, *Empress* isn't just a yacht. It's more like a...mansion on the water. That can sometimes move. But seriously, come on, Char. That's a canned answer if I've ever heard one. You're my last interview. And I'll be honest, you're the only book influencer we're looking at, and that makes you interesting to me. But something I value is honesty. That's a rule for the girls on *Empress*; we live authentically and share our authentic lives with our followers."

I work hard to keep my face under control as I listen. Forcing someone to be honest doesn't sound too authentic to me, but there is something captivating about Viv that I can't deny. I find myself leaning toward her when she talks, holding my breath so my exhales don't mute any of her words.

"Come on, give it to me. The truth." She reaches out, and, before I can stop her, her slender tanned fingers are wrapped around my right hand. Her index finger traces a little circle on the inside of my wrist, sending a shiver up my spine. "Tell me the truth." For a moment, her voice changes. It becomes deeper, more commanding.

There's something intoxicating about her. Something powerful. And I'm desperate. Hearing her mention other interviews, other influencers, ones who probably have more followers and more experience than me, has trig-

gered a flood of panic. This opportunity could be slipping away like the beads of sweat that are racing down my shoulders toward the floor.

"I need the money," I blurt out.

"Go on." Viv's finger stills, but she keeps hold of my wrist, nodding for me to continue.

"My student loans. Bills. Everything. My roommate..." I swallow, forcing away thoughts of Sage. "I don't have a roommate anymore, and I'm having trouble finding someone to replace her, so I'm paying for the whole apartment myself. It's way out of my budget."

Everything is out of my budget, including this trip. I wonder if I'll be compensated for the flight and bus ride. I didn't think to ask Viv before now. I wanted to look like a team player, but maybe that was a mistake. My mother taught my sister and I the value of a hard-earned dollar. Despite being a single mom, she worked her ass off, saving up enough money as an anesthesiologist that when she died, her assets split between Emily and me, half of my college tuition was covered. My mother's cancer didn't let her see me graduate, but she got me there nonetheless. Yet school and simply existing these days is expensive, and I ran out of funds.

"I need this, honestly," I admit, thinking of my remaining student loans, the pile of bills on my kitchen table. My outbox chock-full of hundreds of job applications with no response.

Viv releases my wrist so suddenly that I'm off-balance, as if her weight on my body was an anchor keeping me steady. "And your current job? Does it not pay enough?"

"I was working two jobs to make ends meet. I lost them both when..." I can't help the crack that interjects itself into the middle of my voice. I try again: "My roommate died. It was...it was sudden. We were friends. I couldn't... function, after."

Viv's face softens. Her lips twist sympathetically, and she coos, "Oh, baby, I'm sorry. Listen, I know how it feels to lose someone you love. It's okay, Char."

I try not to bristle. I can't bring myself to ask Viv to not call me that. Only Sage ever called me Char. But if Viv gives me this job, she can call me whatever she wants.

"It's been hard."

"Of course. I had no idea." Viv's face creases in pity, but her makeup is too thick to show her full expression. Her

 **A circle of
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That's appealing.
Almost as
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empathy is muted by Botox and foundation. "I'm sorry." She reaches out and grabs my hand again, patting it. "You know, besides the luxury and the generous pay and the increase in followers, there's something else *Empress* can provide you with."

"What?"

She smiles. "Family. The girls on *Empress* are all close. We're each other's best friends. Whatever you're going through, whatever trauma you have inside, they will be there for you."

I pause. A circle of women I could be friends with. That's appealing. Almost as much as the money. Sage and I were close, but after everything went down, I was left alone. I tend to have a single focused, intense friendship instead of fifty casual acquaintances. It was Sage who was the social, connected one. Without her, I was adrift. First, we stopped being friends, then she died. And spending the past three months holed up in my apartment beset by anxiety hasn't exactly been conducive to meeting new people.

Sometimes you don't recognize how lonely you are until it's explicitly pointed out.

Viv leans back, crossing her arms, appraising me. "I like you, Char. I think this would work."

I meet her eye, unable to hide my surprise. "Wait, really?"

"Yeah. You were honest. I told you—that's important to me. And I've already vetted you. I know your analytics are solid. You clearly didn't buy a bunch of bots. Our other girls have way more engagement and sponsorships, but truthfully, 50K followers for a book influencer isn't bad. Especially on Instagram, which is struggling to keep up with the newer apps. And we can help you level up. In return, you bring a...diversity I think our group needs."

I pull back slightly. "Diversity? I'm white."

"But not straight," Viv says bluntly. "And your look." She gestures to my short hair, the black and gray botanical sleeve tattoos that cover both my arms. "It's something we're lacking. I want people to take us seriously. Not think we're a bunch of Insta thots partying all day long. Your vibe would help with that."

I can't decide if this is a backhanded compliment or not. "Uh, okay."

"So, do you want to join us?"

I gape. "Really? You're offering me the job? Right now?"

A paid position living on a luxury yacht docked off a private island in the Keys with a group of other influencers. Was this happening? I hoped, of course, but I hadn't let myself think it was actually possible. The last time I did that, my lifelong dream was crushed like a flower petal under a combat boot.

As if summoned, the gilded, embossed title of *A Song of Scales and Salt* glints in my peripheral vision. The woman who was reading it earlier has left her table, the book tucked against her chest as she moves to the door. There's a dreamy expression on her face.

My abdomen clenches.

The woman's forearm doesn't quite cover the author's name, and I stare as it passes me by, standing out against the blue scales: SAGE TARTNET.

"I think you'd be a great fit," Viv says, pulling my attention back to her smiling face. The woman holding the book disappears out the door behind her. "I don't like wasting time. You're here, your shit is here, my boat is in the harbor. Ligia Island is forty minutes away. You said you need the money. Why wait? You in, or what?" ■

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Kylie, Before She Was King

The year was 2015, and the youngest Jenner was about to turn the internet's constant criticism into a bona fide beauty empire.

By MIKHAILA ARCHER



Photographed by Eric Ray Davidson and interviewed by Katie L. Connor, February 2015.

Before the lip kits, the millions of Instagram followers, and the countless viral moments, there was the blue hair. Against her family's advice, Kylie Jenner wore it to her very famous sister's very famous wedding—honoring what continues to be her defining skill more than a decade later: capturing our attention. "I'll change my style completely by next week," she told *Cosmopolitan*. "Everyone's always confused." And entertained.

The then-teenage reality star (she'd started on *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* when she was 9) also opened up about the downsides of celebrity—namely, the haters who came with the spotlight. In response, she was seemingly crafting her signature approach to public life: Keep cool, process privately, and profit expertly.

When *Cosmopolitan* asked about the intense plastic surgery rumors (online commenters suggested she'd gotten everything from a nose job to a jaw reconstruction as well as lip filler), Kylie's response was succinct. "You guys have watched me grow up," she said. "My face is going to get different. Now, I know how to do my makeup, contour, everything." Later that year, she'd launch the consistently sold-out Kylie Lip Kits, which led to Kylie Cosmetics and an estimated net worth of nearly \$700 million. (Kylie also launched a hair product line around the time of that blue wedding look.)

Today, in 2026, the now even more multi-hyphenated Kylie (see: her fashion line and acting debut in Charli xcx's *The Moment*) continues to spin critiques into gold. These days, it's with a newfound openness, sharing things like the exact formula for her breast augmentation on social media. Unsurprisingly, her fans—and haters—still crave more. ■



Is it crazy

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or is it love?

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